

Beyond

The ISI Florence & Umbra Institute
Studies in International Education

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Contributors

Giampiero Bevagna

Pierluca Birindelli

Richard Bonanno

Dominique Brigham

Elizabeth Connolly

Colette Daiute

Federico Damonte

Carla Galfano

Alexandra Garey

Jan Kieling

Christine Staton

Alessio Surian

Christian Tarchi

Adrienne Ward

Design and layout

Nina Peci

Contacts

E-mail: npeci@isiflorence.org

www.isiflorence.org | www.umbra.org

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Your Mental Health Matters While Studying Abroad

Elizabeth Connolly

When many of you ventured off to university, you dreamt that part of your experience would include studying abroad. You worked hard to make your study abroad dream come true, either by obtaining a scholarship or taking on a summer job.

As you land in the airport of the country you will be studying in, you will realize that finally your dream has come true. Many of you will be very excited as you are plunged into a country that is very different from where you grew up. You will find yourself surrounded by beautiful architecture like nothing you have ever seen before, you will experience the delicious food from another culture, and you will be intrigued by a new language and way of life.

Before embarking on your study abroad adventure, many of you will create a checklist of *To Dos* to ensure that your experience is a success. This list will likely include carefully choosing the courses you will be taking, making sure you don't forget your computer, figuring out how you will have cell phone and Internet access, and packing all of your favorite clothes. What most likely will not have made your *To Do* list was considering your mental health, and how the transition and living in a new country may affect it. Because your mental health affects your day-to-day functioning, it very much impacts your study abroad experience and, therefore, should not get lost in your excitement. Considering your mental health needs should, in fact, be at the top of your *To Do* list. Why? Because often following on the heels of the excitement of being in a new and beautiful country, where you meet new people and have new experiences, is *culture shock*. For some of you culture shock will sneak up and surprise you on the first day of your arrival, while for others it may take a few weeks before it sets in.

Culture shock is a “normal” phenomenon to experience when one embarks upon living in a new environment and culture. It can be described as a sense of disorientation – you feel like a fish out of water. Know that, when culture shock sets in, you are not alone. Many of your fellow students will also be experiencing it. On one hand, you are enjoying new experiences and meeting new people. On the other hand, you find yourself feeling isolated from your support system of parents and friends back home, and feeling a loss of your sense of independence because you do not know the local language. On top of this, everything seems like a challenge each time you walk out of your apartment, because all that surrounds you is different from what you are used to. This combination can lead to a roller coaster of emotions. While you will have moments of excitement and happiness, they may be followed by feelings of frustration, loneliness, anxiety, stress, irritability and depression. You may find yourself laughing at one point in the day, and then overtaken by tears later on, feeling homesick for familiarity.

The key to successfully working through culture shock is to consciously face the negative feelings associated with the challenges of studying abroad head-on by taking steps to integrate and ground yourself in the country you will call “home” for the next few months. To do this you must let go of how you think life should be in your new home, and instead embrace how it actually is. When you set the goal of studying abroad you did so because you felt that experiencing a new country, and all that comes with that, would be good for you. Trust in your intuition; it is not wrong. Rather than looking at culture shock as a negative experience, embrace it as an opportunity to grow.

One of the greatest ironies of my life is that I found my true self in a foreign place. I was the girl who Googled flights back to the United States, while waiting for my luggage in the Florence (Italy) airport. I cried and stayed in bed for my first days abroad, wishing I could go home. It was hard, but I slowly embraced the next four months

in Florence. Acknowledge that by simply being here, you are brave. My decision to stay in Florence allowed me to better understand others, because it forced me to embrace myself. Do not go home; it gets better. You are rightfully afraid, but choose to view your fear as an invitation for personal growth. I am grateful that I made that choice every day of my life.

– *The wise words of a study abroad student (Florence, Italy).*

Tips for Successfully Dealing with Culture Shock:

1) Do some research before your study abroad program begins. Take time, before getting on the plane, to learn about your new home country, its customs, and the people you will be interacting with. You don't need to be fluent in the language when you arrive in your new country, but take some time to learn some basic conversational words that you will be using regularly to help you feel more at ease.

2) Be mindful of your mental health. Don't be afraid to disclose if you have a history of a mental health issue. Study abroad programs know that approximately 1 in 5 youths experience a mental health issue at some point during their life, and approximately 1 in 5 adults experience a mental illness in a given year (National Alliance on Mental Illness – www.nami.org). Disclosing a mental health issue does not mean that you will be prevented from being accepted into a program. By being open about your mental health needs, your study abroad program can assist in making sure that you have adequate mental health support in place from day one, to help ensure that your experience is a success. If you take medication, be sure to either bring enough medication to last over the course of your study abroad stay, or confirm that you can obtain that same medication in the country you are studying in. Maintaining your medication regimen is important for your mental health. If you find yourself struggling with culture shock, don't be afraid to reach out for help. A mental health professional experienced in assisting students in navigating their way through culture shock can be helpful in assisting you to adjust to your new surroundings, and

support you in the emotional growth that takes place when you step outside of your comfort zone.

3) Put down roots. While staying in touch with parents and friends at home is important to your sense of security, dare to take some steps to let go of your life back home, so that you can embrace your life in your new country. If you are constantly checking into life back home through technology, you can't possibly be fully checked into life in your new study abroad country. Consciously take time in your day to tune out from social media interaction to focus on your current surroundings and people.

4) Be wise, while embracing the new sense of freedom that comes with being so far away from your parents. There is just something about putting an ocean between you and your parents that can lead to impulsive - and sometimes dangerous - behavior. While studying abroad, stay true to your core beliefs, values, and goals. Stop and think whether a choice that you are making while studying abroad is something you will feel proud about the next day, and consider if the choice impacts on your personal safety.

5) Be safe. A major factor that puts you at risk while studying abroad is your access to alcohol. Many of you have limited access to alcohol in the United States because the legal drinking age is 21. Alcohol can kill. Excessive drinking is responsible for 1 in 10 deaths (individuals age 20-64 years) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - www.cdc.gov). While you have been warned about date rape drugs like Rohypnol, you need to be mindful that alcohol is considered by many to be the #1 date rape drug. You have grown up in an era of reality television shows where excessive alcohol consumption is often celebrated, but in "the real world" excessive alcohol consumption can have traumatic or deadly consequences. In the excitement of studying abroad, be mindful of your safety.

6) Make new friends. While many of you are embarking on studying abroad with the security of having a friend accompany you, spending too much time with the same person, or close group of friends, can actually become a source of stress. Be open-minded when meeting new people. Dare to talk to new people in your classes. Your classes are full of new friends just waiting to meet you. Engage in the numerous activities

organized by your study abroad program. While participating in an activity that interests you, it is likely you will meet a like-minded person that has the potential to be a new friend. While being open-minded to meeting new people is important, equally important is being open to taking time for being on your own. Doing things on your own is an opportunity to build self-confidence.

7) Ground yourself. Explore your new surroundings. Wander the streets of your new neighborhood and city to familiarize yourself with your new home. Find your grocery store and a favorite café to enjoy your morning coffee and become a regular. Dare to say good morning to your new neighbors and shop-keepers that you pass on your way to class. Find your local gym or running route. Make sure you balance enjoying new experiences with eating healthy and getting proper sleep. By creating a routine, you will feel more at home in your new city. Creating structure for yourself is very important for sound mental health.

8) Take time each day to stop and appreciate where you are studying and how fortunate you are - even if it has been a challenging day. Take the time to journal, or create a memory scrapbook, about your positive experiences and successes. By doing this, at the end of your study abroad experience you will have a wonderful souvenir of not only the places that you visited, but also of the growth that you accomplished while studying abroad.

9) Bring touches of home with you for your room, such as photos. When you arrive in your new city, purchase small items that will make the room you are staying in over the next several months YOUR room.

10) Embrace the unknown. Approach your days with curiosity, instead of fear. Be willing to learn from your experiences. Maintain a sense of humor. There is no “perfect” study abroad experience or “right” way to do it. You have much to learn over the course of the next several months. Embrace the learning process, being kind and patient with yourself. Be able to laugh at your mistakes, viewing them as an opportunity to grow. When you get that feeling of anxiousness, instead of seeing it as bad, see it as a sign that you are stepping outside of your comfort zone and growing.

11) Be proud. You have embarked on this once in a lifetime study abroad experience. Be proud of yourself for embarking on a journey of personal growth.

It is good to have an end to journey toward;
but it is the journey that matters, in the end.

– *Ernest Hemingway*