

## Checklist – The Emotional Rollercoaster of Studying and Working Abroad

While studying or working abroad is extremely rewarding in many ways, it can also be very stressful. Students experience all sorts of new situations and emotions, and may not know how to deal with all of them, especially when they're isolated from friends and family. This checklist will cover some of the emotions you can expect to encounter while abroad, and will give you a chance to check in with your own feelings and thoughts. Remember that everybody experiences change differently, and study abroad programs are all different, so you may not relate to all of the experiences here. Check in with yourself and remember that **there is no wrong response** to life abroad – even if it means coming home early.

### Before your departure

- ✓ **Excitement** – Study and work abroad programs are incredible opportunities, and you will likely be very excited in the months leading up to your departure. You may want to channel this excitement into making specific plans for your time abroad, and sharing your excitement with your friends.
- ✓ **Procrastination** – When you are preparing to go abroad, the future might seem distant or unreal. Suddenly, you realize that you are leaving in a matter of days and haven't even begun to prepare! Procrastinating on packing is common, but if you are worried that you will forget to plan important details ahead of time, check out our other Checklist: Practical Preparation for Study and Work Abroad, or make your own to feel more confident. Each country you might go to will have its own list of matters that you simply must organize well in advance of your trip, whether that is a student visa, documentation of health tests or some other requirement, there are some tasks that must be tackled early in the planning stage. Be sure you identify those tasks at the start of your planning.
- ✓ **Anxiety** – The unknown can be intimidating, and many students worry that they won't make friends, won't understand the language or culture, won't succeed academically, or will run into any number of problems while abroad. Sometimes, when these fears are mixed with the excitement of travel, students become confused by their own emotions. Anxiety, nervousness and apprehension are all natural reactions to what for many people is their first time going abroad.
- ✓ **Cold feet** – Because the idea of studying abroad doesn't always seem real until the last minute, students sometimes get anxious right before they board the plane to their destination, and may feel that the entire program was a bad idea. If this happens to you, consider these questions: Why did I decide to study/work abroad? What am I hoping to gain from the experience? What is it that drew me to this program in particular? It is easy to lose sight of the benefits of study abroad programs when faced with actually leaving home, but you've probably already put serious consideration into the decision, so it probably is the right one.
- ✓ **Mental health conditions** – Many students struggle with a variety of mental health challenges, and may as a result be hesitant to go abroad. Whether you are currently being treated for mental health conditions or if you see them as something in your past, you should know that preparing for and participating in a

- study abroad program can bring about a return or increase in symptoms. If you are currently involved with mental health services, discuss the advisability of participating in a study abroad program with your mental health practitioner. Make a plan as to how to stay well mentally, what coping strategies you can use and what kind of support you will need and how to get it. Consider things like: writing in a journal, keeping in close contact with someone at home.
- ✓ **Do some research before you go. Be sure you know what mental health resources, if any, are available in the country you are going to and how to access these resources.**
  - ✓ **If you are taking a medication, be sure you will have an adequate supply and know if you can transport this medication into the country.**
  - ✓ You can also see the bottom of this checklist for resources on dealing with mental health issues and conditions while abroad.

### While you are away

- ✓ **Arrival anxiety** – When you first arrive at your destination, everything will probably be new. You may not know where to go, and may have to trust strangers to give you advice and directions. This can be overwhelming at the best of times, and isn't helped when you have been on a plane and likely haven't slept in a long time. All the more so if you are not fluent in the language of the country. You may feel that you are dreaming, or that you are walking on "auto-pilot". This feeling is temporary and should pass as you get settled.
- ✓ **Embarrassment** – As you learn to navigate a new culture and new situations, you will inevitably make mistakes. One of the most difficult parts of studying abroad is realizing that it is okay to make mistakes and embarrass yourself as you learn. This does not mean that you are culturally unaware or ignorant – your peers will likely recognize that you are adjusting, and will not hold your mistakes against you. It is up to you to do the same for yourself, and not to be afraid to apologize when you do make a mistake. By acknowledging your own learning process, you will show others that you are making an effort.
- ✓ **Shame** – An off-shoot of embarrassment, shame is the feeling you get when you have done something wrong that you believe will make others think less of you, or that makes you think less of yourself. You may "catastrophize", or see small mistakes and situations as much more meaningful than they really are. You may believe that they are reflective of you as a person. Abstaining from critical self-judgment is one of the most difficult parts of the international experience for many students.
- ✓ **Culture shock** – You will have been told to expect cultural differences, but most students don't fully understand what this means until they arrive in their host country. You may become impatient with the way things work in your host country: things may seem inefficient, overly demanding, or too formal. You may notice that levels of privacy and cleanliness are different from what you are used to. You may also find yourself angry about cultural values that you consider degrading or restrictive in some way. Think about the reasons behind the cultural differences, and try to remain open to different ways of doing things, even if they

- surprise or shock you at first. Think about your own culturally ingrained beliefs, and how they are reflective of values that may not be shared the world around. Are you angry at something that is objectively unjust, or are you imposing your own cultural norms on your hosts? Don't be afraid to assert your personal needs, but also don't expect your host family or organization to "come around" to your way of thinking. Every cultural dialogue is a two-way discussion.
- ✓ **Homesickness** – At any point in time during your program, you may start to miss home. Homesickness tends to occur in cycles, and is often triggered by a particularly stressful situation or a moment that reminds you of the people and things you have left behind. It may feel deeply painful, and you may start counting down the days until you return home, or wondering why you decided to come. Ask yourself if what you are experiencing is an ongoing problem (and if so, if there is something you can do to fix it), or if you are simply missing the familiar comforts and friends of home. Keep in contact with people from home, or even go looking for gifts to bring your friends and family. Immerse yourself in your program. Most importantly, know that homesickness is worst when you are bored, and try to find new ways to entertain yourself. The feeling of homesickness will pass.
  - ✓ **Exhaustion/Restlessness** – Everything is new when you are away from home, and it can be difficult to feel relaxed. This is especially true if you are immersed in a language you don't speak fluently, or if you are living in a homestay situation or with people you don't know. You may be exhausted, but worry that by taking a day to rest, you aren't making the most of your limited experience. Only you can truly know what is best for you, but remember that a normal amount of activity for you may be different here than at home. *Everything* will require more energy, but you may get a higher energy payout too (especially if you are extraverted). Try to tailor your activities to your energy needs.
  - ✓ **Anxiety** – While anxiety is most commonly a problem in anticipation of going abroad, there are many reasons students experience anxiety while abroad, especially near the beginning of their travels. You may worry that you will not fit in, find friends, or learn enough about the language or culture. You may feel under-qualified for the types of courses or work you are participating in, and may worry that you will fail or will suffer academically back home. It may seem that all of the other international students are adjusting better or more quickly than you. Remember that adjustment to a new culture is an individual process, and there is no right way to do it. Likely, all of your peers are experiencing the same things as you, but at different times and in different ways. Especially if you have peers who are also international students, consider talking with them about your experiences. You may find that you have more in common than you realize, and that your anxieties begin to disappear as you voice your concerns.
  - ✓ **Frustration** – Especially if you have chosen an international program expecting to learn a new skill, such as a language or trade, you may feel frustrated at an apparent lack of progress. You may quickly learn where and how to order food and buy groceries, for example, but then run into trouble at a train station and feel that you are backsliding, or have stopped progressing. Remember that every new situation brings new challenges and expectations, and that it is impossible to

- adjust to an entirely new culture overnight. Take stock of your accomplishments – they are probably greater in number than you think.
- ✓ **Cultural adjustment** – At a certain point in your travels, you are likely to begin to feel as though you fit in. You will be speaking the language better, meeting new people, and navigating everyday life more easily. This can come in waves, but often indicates that you are coming to accept the different way of life in your host country, and understanding the reasons behind certain cultural differences. You will not necessarily “pass for a native” – and need not attempt to – but will likely start to navigate a line somewhere between your native culture and your host culture. This is reflective of a two-way cultural dialogue.
  - ✓ **Relapse** – After believing that you have overcome the frustrations associated with culture shock, and beginning to navigate daily life more easily, you may find that you “relapse” from time to time. It may take learning more about your host country to realize that you really don’t know very much at all. Cultural integration is a long process, and most students come to the conclusion that they are not as culturally competent as they initially thought. This is a sign of self-awareness and reflection, and does not mean that you are culturally incompetent. It is possible to get back to a place of feeling physically and emotionally secure without thinking that you know everything about a country or culture.
  - ❖ While all of the above-described feelings are normal and common among students living abroad, they are distinguishable by the fact that they are usually temporary and relatively mild (even if they don’t always feel that way). While it is important to remain open to new cultural experiences, not all of which will be positive, there is a difference between cultural experience and mental distress. If these feelings persist or are overwhelming or you are feeling unsafe there are resources available online, at home, and in your host country to help you deal with such challenges (see the bottom of this list for some example resources).
  - ❖ It is also possible that some students may experience psychological responses to traumatic experiences such as physical assault, sexual assault, a serious accident, or witnessing a traumatic event. If things cannot be safely managed from where you are, it may be necessary for you to relocate or return home.

### Re-entry/Going home

- ✓ **Reverse culture shock** – When you arrive back home, you may find that you experience some of the feelings associated with culture shock. “Reverse culture shock” can be even more dramatic than culture shock, as you expect to feel at home in your own community. You may feel that others have changed, or that you have progressed while your friends and family have remained stagnant. You may begin to draw comparisons with your host country, and criticize aspects of your home culture. At its worst, reverse culture shock can lead students to lash out at friends and family for things that they have always done.
- ✓ **Relief** – While stressful, going home can also be a great relief. After spending so much time and energy trying to navigate new situations daily, it can be freeing to go back to a simpler everyday routine.

- ✓ **Inundation** – Contrary to relief, some students find that returning home results in a more hectic schedule. You may have had more social interactions and less professional and academic work while abroad, depending on the nature of your international program. Especially for students dealing with significant stress at work and home, this shift back to life at home can be overwhelming. Coupled with the feeling of having to “catch-up” from what you have missed while away, you may feel like the workload is unmanageable. This feeling will subside, however, as you reacclimate to your home country.
- ✓ **Enthusiasm** – When you return home to your friends and family, you will likely be thrilled to spend time with your loved ones, and to tell them stories of your time abroad. Some students are so excited about telling stories, in fact, that they forget to listen to their friends’ news. Sharing what everyone has been doing over the past several months, and listening to your friends’ stories while also sharing your own, can be a great way of reconnecting.
- ✓ **Homesickness** – While you were away, you may have come to feel very at home in your host country. This can lead you to feel homesick, especially knowing that you may never return (or not for several years). Keeping in contact with friends from your time abroad will help you to feel connected to your second home, so that you do not have to leave it behind all at once.
- ✓ **Alienation** – Returning home, many students feel that they no longer “fit in” at home. This is part of the process of reverse culture shock, and may leave students feeling that they don’t truly belong anywhere. You may have just been getting used to life abroad, but will likely still not feel like a local native in your host country, and to feel like a foreigner in your home land as well may be shocking. This, however, is a sign that you have come to truly understand and internalize some of the cultural values of your host country, and that you have been open to new ideas and experiences.

#### Resources for dealing with emotional stress

<http://www.uvic.ca/services/counselling/> - University of Victoria counseling services.

<https://www.uvic.ca/mentalhealth/students/self-care/index.php> - University of Victoria Student Mental Health site with tips for self-care

<http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca> - BC site with self-help guides, resources, etc.

<http://www.journeywoman.com> - Travel advice for women.

<http://www.bootsnall.com> - Indie travel guide with guides for LGBTQ travellers and travellers with disabilities.

[http://allabroad.us/advice.php?cid=58&cat\\_id=26](http://allabroad.us/advice.php?cid=58&cat_id=26) - Advice for re-adjusting to home after your time abroad.

[http://suicideprevention.wikia.com/wiki/International\\_Suicide\\_Prevention\\_Directory](http://suicideprevention.wikia.com/wiki/International_Suicide_Prevention_Directory) - International suicide prevention directory.

<http://www.miusa.org/resources> - A non-profit organization that provides information on education and travel abroad for people with disabilities. Their resource library has excellent tip sheets on study abroad and mental health conditions.

Or go to <http://www.studentsabroad.com/handbook/resources.php?country=general> for a longer list of resources for studying abroad.