

# Mental Health Issues and Study Abroad

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# CULTURE SHOCK and YOUR MENTAL HEALTH ABROAD

- **Culture shock** is the difficulty people have adjusting to a new culture that differs markedly from their own.
- **Culture shock** is real and travel can exacerbate pre-existing conditions such as depression, eating disorders, self-mutilation, alcohol/drug abuse, anxiety, etc.
- **Culture shock** can be divided into 4 stages:
  - **Honeymoon stage**
  - **Frustration stage**
  - **Understanding stage**
  - **Acclimation stage**

## HONEYMOON

- Excitement and euphoria
- General anticipation of everything that you are about to experience

## FRUSTRATION

- Initial excitement dissipates
- Feelings of anxiety, anger and homesickness creep in
- Rejection and reduced interest in new surroundings

## UNDERSTANDING

- Forming of new friendships, both with locals and program students
- Reduced homesickness and frustration
- Greater comfort with speaking, listening, and understanding the language spoken in the host country
- Improved handling of the stressors and situations previously viewed as frustrating

## ACCLIMATION

- Decreased feeling like a foreigner and increased feeling that host country is a second home
- Ability to laugh about things that were frustrating at earlier stages of cultural shock

# Mental Health Issues and Study Abroad

- Do not attempt to diagnose any perceived mental health issues. Rather, you should focus on the behaviors that are disrupting the program.
- Common signs of possible mental health problems:
  - Changes in behavior, self-imposed isolation from group, perpetually late/absent from activities, alcohol/drug abuse, change in personal hygiene/appearance, unusual outbursts of crying or anger, etc.
- Do not hesitate to communicate concerns to VCU. We can inform Counseling Services for you.

# Strategies for Success

- Cultivate a climate of respect
- Create a sense of community & connection
- Listen empathetically
- Modeling sets the tone
- Set clear expectations for behavior
- Communicate clearly, consistently, regularly
- Confront inappropriate behavior immediately and assertively
- Proportional and graduated responses to disruptive behavior
- Threats are taken seriously and reported
- Consult

# What do I look for?

- **Distress signals include:**
  - **Depression**—including poor concentration, loss of interest, withdrawal, bouts of crying
  - **Agitation**—student may appear anxious, can't sit still
  - **Disorientation**—student seems “out of it,” may exhibit bizarre behavior, has abrupt changes to hygiene/appearance
  - **Suicidal** expressions, thoughts or threats
  - **Isolation** from group, missing class and activities
  - **Alcohol or drug abuse**- including going to class or excursions intoxicated
  - **Eating concerns** – including abrupt changes in appetite or weight

# When do I ask for help?

- If the problem is more serious than you feel comfortable handling
- You are extremely busy, stressed, and cannot find the time to talk to the student
- You think your personal feeling about the student or the subject will interfere with your objectivity.
- You feel that you have helped as much as you can and further assistance is needed

# Ways to Intervene

- Talk with student privately
- Show concern
- Document all conversations
- Help student understand they can receive help for their distress
- Provide student with referral information
- If you believe student is in danger of harming self or others, please contact the Education Abroad Office as well as other VCU resources