

EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND STUDY ABROAD

Guide for Students Leaving on
Short-Term Study Abroad Programs

Do you get “stressed out” a lot? Have you ever experienced feelings of anxiety, depression, or felt so overwhelmed that you coped with stress in not-so-helpful ways, ways that made you feel worse? It’s important that you give some thought to taking care of yourself while you’re studying abroad.

It’s normal for people to respond to the stress of travel, culture shock, and being with a group 24-7, by feeling “stressed out” at times. It’s also the reality that different people have different ways of coping and different levels of resiliency to stress. Some people haven’t yet learned effective skills of coping with stress, and some are biologically more vulnerable to getting physical and emotional symptoms from stress.

Now is a good time to stop and think about what your personal resiliency is to stress, what can help you to manage your stress while studying abroad, and whether you may need some support from others.

This guide is intended to help you think about making a good plan to take care of your emotional health while studying abroad. **If you have experienced challenges with out-of-control emotions, depression, anxiety, disordered eating, chemical dependency, or any other emotional health issue, Augsburg Abroad staff encourages you to talk with us about your needs so we can know how to best support you.** If you have an emotional health concern, Augsburg Abroad staff can help you to identify the optimal study abroad program for you, and can help you make a plan to be safe and successful on the program you choose by helping you to develop a “Self-Care Plan” (see Section B). Augsburg Abroad will also encourage you to let your faculty program leader(s) know how they can best support you and can facilitate a conversation with your program leader if that is something you would find helpful.

If you have experienced significant emotional health challenges in the past, it is a good idea to **talk with a mental health counselor about developing a personalized self-care plan for your study abroad.** Augsburg’s Center for Counseling & Health Promotion is one great (confidential) resource for this. See Section B for details on what should go into a self-care plan.

This guide includes: A) Prevention of Emotional Health Issues; B) Self-Care Plan for Emotional Health; C) Medications for Emotional Health; and D) Coping Strategies for Specific Emotional Health Concerns.

A. PREVENTION OF EMOTIONAL HEALTH ISSUES

Get enough sleep. If you are changing time zones, it’s really important that your body get onto the new sleep schedule as soon as possible. Especially for people vulnerable to depression or bipolar disorder, getting “off” on your sleep schedule can be a big problem (there are studies of college students that suggest that students with bad sleep habits are more prone to depression; also, loss of sleep for several

days can set off a “manic episode” for someone vulnerable to bipolar disorder). As soon as you get in country, begin keeping a sleep/wake schedule that fits for the local time. Talk to your doctor about whether using a supplement such as melatonin before bedtime for a few days may help your body adjust (melatonin is generally considered safe for short-term use, though it is important you carefully research any supplements you put into your body, and talk to your MD if you have any medical conditions). Try to be outdoors morning and evening to help reset your body clock. Limit the number of nights you stay out late and try to keep a somewhat regular sleep schedule.

Limit alcohol. Be aware that when you are under stress, you are more vulnerable to “overdoing it” if you choose to drink, and could end up with more stress than you started with (for example, doing something embarrassing, making a sexual choice you might not have made otherwise, getting into an argument or fight, or being too hung-over for class the next morning). Remember that alcohol has the effect of a depressant on your brain chemistry; over time, overusing alcohol can make your brain more susceptible to emotional health problems. Talk with your doctor if you are on an anti-depressant medication or other medication that may be affected by alcohol (many medications for depression and anxiety can increase the intoxication effect of alcohol so that you become intoxicated sooner than you normally would). If you are studying abroad and taking a medication for mental health, a good self-care choice would be to choose **not** to use alcohol at all.

Avoid drugs altogether. In addition to the legal reasons for avoiding drugs, drugs such as marijuana can induce a panic attack, a manic episode, or even psychosis (yes, they don’t always, but is it worth taking the risk while you are studying abroad?) Also, know you are at greater risk for drug-induced mental health issues if you have any family history of anxiety, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia.

Exercise. This one may be built into your program, but if you find you are spending a lot of time sitting on a bus or just standing in museums, find a way to get out and really work up a sweat, 30-45 minutes, 3-4 times a week. For many people, taking a run or even a fast walk can do the trick. Exercise is one of the best ways of managing stress and emotional health.

Journaling/Quiet Time. Find a way to vent emotionally and to process all that you are taking in. For some people, a short walk on their own every day or two is really helpful, others like to keep a travel journal (one that is just for you, not for your professor, so you can really vent); or you could email to a friend back home. If you are frustrated with a student who is on the program with you, you can avoid the potential for more interpersonal stress by talking with the person directly in a respectful way. If you just need to vent, it’s usually better vent to someone back home, rather than talking behind someone’s back with other students on the program.

B. SELF-CARE PLAN FOR YOUR EMOTIONAL HEALTH

If you have a history of emotional health concerns, or if you know there are emotional health issues that run in your family, make sure you put together your own “self-care plan” to help prevent problems. You can make this plan on your own if you decide you do not want to talk with Augsburg Abroad, but if emotional health is a challenge in your life, we strongly encourage you to let Augsburg Abroad staff know so that we can support you and put together the best resources for your study abroad to be a success.

•**Meet with a mental health counselor or medical doctor to help develop your personalized self-care plan.** If you don't have a counselor, you could talk with one of the counselors at Counseling & Health Promotion on campus (612-330-1707). Services are confidential so your CCHP counselor will not talk with anyone (including anyone at Augsburg Abroad or faculty) without your written permission.

•**Identify daily stress management practices that work for you. What do you know you need to do to stay healthy?** Some examples of helpful practices include: exercising, taking daily alone time; getting enough sleep, emailing/talking with friends about how you're doing, journaling, and focusing on the positive. What practices work for you?

•**Think about your "early warning signs."** For instance, if you have had panic attacks before, what is your first sign of this? Difficulty breathing? Heart beating faster? Feeling dizzy? If you have struggled with depression, do you notice you start spending more time on your own? Get irritable? Start sleeping more? If you can name your early warning signs, you have a better chance of "catching" something before it develops into a problem. It's a good idea to do a weekly "check-in" while on your study abroad program to stay tuned in to how you are doing emotionally. You could check-in with a friend on the study abroad, a friend or family member back home if you have regular email access, or even with your faculty program leader.

•**Identify support resources you will use if you find you're struggling on study abroad.** It's helpful to identify in advance what you will do if your emotional health concern starts to become a problem (possibilities might include some or all of the following: talk with your faculty program leader, contact Augsburg Abroad staff, meet with a local physician or counselor, contact your family, or contact your therapist at home.)

C. MEDICATIONS FOR EMOTIONAL HEALTH

It is very important that you talk with your doctor about your study abroad (well in advance of the program) if you are on any medications for depression, anxiety, ADHD or another emotional health concern. Here are some tips from the Augsburg Abroad Student Guide on planning ahead for your medication needs while studying abroad, along with some additional tips related to medications for emotional/mental health.

Tips from the "Augsburg Abroad Student Guide:

•If you will be on any kind of prescription drugs while abroad, it is important to consult with your physician prior to departure. Be sure to find out how to adjust the timing of when you take your medication so that you do not risk over- or under-dosage due to the time difference between the Midwest (Central Time Zone) and your location abroad. Make a specific plan with your physician about your dosing schedule for the first few days of the program (which may include traveling through a few different time zones).

•It is best to take enough of a supply of your medication to cover your entire time abroad if you are on a short-term program. If this is not feasible for some reason, talk with Augsburg Abroad staff about

availability of the prescription in country (prescriptions from the U.S. are not always available abroad). Identify a plan in advance for how and where you will refill your prescription.

- Be careful to keep medications in a place where they cannot be lost or stolen. Carry all medications with you on the plane in your carry-on luggage. In case your checked luggage is lost or stolen, you then have your medication supply with you.
- It is advised to take an official letter from your doctor, stating your condition and medical needs. Include in the letter the generic name of the medication, instructions and dosage.
- Mailing medicines or vitamins is not advisable, since they may be held at customs.
- Carry the prescription(s) in their original pharmacy containers with the prescription label in your name. Be sure to show the generic name and dosage of the drug, and any instructions for use.
- If your medication needs to be refrigerated or have special care, keep this in mind. Work with your doctor to ensure its safety and inform your program leaders.
- People with diabetes are encouraged to bring a sufficient supply of needles and syringes with a prescription or doctor's authorization.

Here are some additional things to think about if you are on medication(s) for emotional/mental health concerns:

If you have recently started taking a medication....

It is important that you are “stable” on your new medication and dosage for at least a couple of weeks before you travel. Discuss this with your doctor.

If you have recently stopped taking a medication...

Consider bringing a supply of the medication along with you on your study abroad program even if you do not plan on using it; if your symptoms of depression or anxiety or other emotional health concern get worse again; you will have medication easily available and can prevent the symptoms from becoming a problem on the program. Make sure to discuss this with your doctor to know whether this would be a helpful option for you, and when/how to restart the medication if necessary (your doctor may want you to taper on to the medication slowly while restarting, or may advise against any change in medications while traveling abroad).

Trouble with anxiety or panic attacks?

Consider talking with your doctor about whether it would be helpful to get a small supply of an anti-anxiety medication to carry with you “just in case.” Some people who have had panic attacks in the past find that they are less prone to the panic if they have medication available, even if they never actually

use it. If you have any issues with chemical dependency, make sure you talk with your doctor about these issues in deciding which anxiety medication may be appropriate for you.

D. COPING STRATEGIES FOR SPECIFIC EMOTIONAL HEALTH CONCERNS

Trouble with panic?

If you have experienced panic attacks in the past, you know that a panic attack is one of the most uncomfortable things a person can experience, but that they go away, usually within about 10 minutes. Symptoms of panic attacks include:

- heart beating fast
- difficulty breathing
- feeling like you are dying or “going crazy”
- feeling nauseous
- having hot or cold flashes
- wanting to escape

If you do have a panic attack while on the program, one of the most important things you can do is to reassure yourself, “it’s just a panic attack, it’s not a big deal, it will go away.” You can help keep the panic from getting more uncomfortable by focusing your attention on breathing into your lower abdomen and trying to make your exhale longer than your inhale. There is really practical information on the website www.anxieties.com on managing panic attacks; if panic is something you worry about, definitely check out the website and practice the techniques they offer there. You could also work with your counselor or a counselor at Counseling & Health Promotion to learn skills for managing panic attacks. If you anticipate you might experience a panic attack on a program, it will be very helpful to inform one of the program leaders so that they understand what is happening if it should occur, and know what you would like them to do to help you out (for example, you might ask that they walk with you to a separate room and talk with you in a calming voice, helping you to slow down your breathing). It might also be helpful to advise your program leader if there is a particular situation that can bring on a panic attack (for example, being in an enclosed space). If your program leader is aware, they can play a role in helping you to avoid a known trigger for the panic.

Trouble with depression?

Depression is a common experience for college students; a 2005 national study found that 16% of college students reported having had a diagnosis of depression at some time; many more students have experienced depression but never asked for help. The symptoms of depression include having several of the following for a period of at least a couple of weeks:

- feeling down (or sometimes feeling “flat”)
- fatigue and low energy
- irritability
- loss of appetite
- sleep difficulties (difficulty falling and maintaining sleep, or oversleeping)
- loss of motivation
- difficulty concentrating

- isolating and spending more time alone
- hopelessness
- suicidal thoughts

If you have experienced depression in the past, be aware that even on a short-term study abroad, it is possible that some of these symptoms could recur due to the stress and changes in your body. It is especially important for you to get on a regular sleep schedule as soon as you arrive in country, as loss of sleep can make you more vulnerable to depression. Staying physically active is also important (rhythmic exercise 3-4 times a week for 30-45 minutes is helpful). A self-care plan as noted in Section B can play a crucial role in helping you to prevent depression from interfering with your study abroad.

If you have any of the symptoms of depression named above on the study abroad, let one of your program leaders know – depression tends to thrive “in the dark” and when you are talking about it with others, it often starts to get better. Your program leader can also help you identify what you need to do to take care of yourself and prevent the depression from getting worse, and can consult with other support resources.

Trouble with eating disorders?

Many college students struggle with eating as a way of coping with emotional stress. Disordered eating can take different forms, for example:

- binging (eating in an out-of-control way)
- purging (often through vomiting or over-exercise)
- severely restricting how much you are eating (until this becomes a focus of much of your time and depletes energy in your body and brain).

Students who have experienced disordered eating in the past may find that they struggle less with these issues during a study abroad, as the social environment of the group, the positive excitement of the program, and the different messages about food and bodies in a different culture may all positively affect someone’s feelings about their body and food. However, some people have experienced that the change in food, eating patterns, stress, and body messages increases or brings back their struggles with food and body. Again, if this is an area you think could be an issue for you, talk to a counselor before you study abroad. Disordered eating patterns can result in significant physical health problems (such as fainting and electrolyte imbalances that put the heart at risk). You may also find that you benefit from talking to a nutritionist before you leave to develop a positive eating plan that integrates the foods available in the countries you will be studying in; it may also be important to inform your group leader of specific things that will be helpful to you (for example, not going too long without having some food available; carrying healthy snacks with you at all times; having some food choices at restaurants; having opportunity for regular meals).

CONCLUSION

If you have questions about anything in this guide, Augsburg Abroad staff would welcome the chance to talk with you. We encourage you to draw on all your resources in planning for a successful study abroad, including your physician, mental health counselor, faculty, and Augsburg Abroad.

More information on common emotional health concerns for college students can be obtained on the Counseling & Health Promotion website at www.augsburg.edu/cchp/self-help .

Guide Written By Beth Carlson, Ph.D., L.P., Augsburg Counseling & Health Promotion

Please Note: Sections on “Sleep” and “Additional Things to Think About if You Are on Medication” are based on information received in consultations with holistic psychiatrist, Dr. Henry Emmons (author of The Chemistry of Joy).