

# MEANINGFUL TRAVEL TIPS AND TALES

MENTAL HEALTH AND SELF-CARE



An Initiative to Make Travel More Inclusive



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# WHY WE CREATED THIS BOOK FOR TRAVELERS WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

## A NOTE FROM GOABROAD



*Note: Throughout this book we refer to the westernized notion of mental illness.*

One in four people in the world will [suffer from mental illness in their lifetime](#). On the spectrum of disorders and illnesses, this looks different for everyone— just as treatment looks different for everyone.

As transformative and freeing as travel can be, it's important to remember that it won't always be a perfect or positive experience for everyone. There is a dominant narrative in travel, one that portrays a very go-getter, happy-go-lucky, high-spirited, wonderful, magical experience. Sometimes, that just isn't the case. What's most important, however, is to **remember that the less-than-instagram-worthy-days should not prevent you from meaningful travel**. You can not only travel, study, intern, teach, and volunteer abroad with a mental illness, but you can thrive while doing it.

Society's stigmatization of mental health care and mental disorders is what prevents more than half of people currently suffering from a mental disorder from seeking proper care and treatment. We want to talk about it— especially in the context of travel and international education.

*"Mental illness is not a personal failure. In fact, if there is failure, it is to be found in the way we have responded to people with mental and brain disorders."* – Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director-General of World Health Organization.

As part of GoAbroad's push for more inclusivity in travel, our writers share their personal experiences, resources, and advice about managing their mental health abroad. **We want our readers to be inspired to travel, but to always prioritize their health and well-being.**

Interested in joining this initiative? [Partner with us!](#)

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# OUR CONTRIBUTORS



**Niki Kraska**, after intermittent volunteer stints in South Africa, Guatemala, and India, decided to quit her job in the U.S. to pursue a life of full time international volunteering and writing. She uses her experience working in non-profits to volunteer wherever her heart leads her and plans to pursue an international master's program to further her impact, because, Ubuntu.



**Charleen Johnson Stoever** is an introverted lover of dragon fruit juice. She loves sitting with Nicaraguan children on the side of the street while patiently breaking down North American stereotypes. With a short haircut and watermelon shaped earrings, she is passionate about mental health and the rewards that come with vulnerable travel. Not only does she write for five different blogs, she also teaches art and English classes in the mountains of Nicaragua.



**Jennifer Teeter** graduated from Seattle University with a bachelor's degree in political science and French. During her undergraduate studies, she studied abroad in Grenoble, France. Jennifer now works at a university outside of Portland, Oregon, but she dreams of becoming a writer one day. Until then, she will live vicariously through her Instagram feed, using vacation days to see as much of the world as possible.



**Rebecca Murphy's** desire to experience the world began as a young child during her first viewing of The Sound of Music. Four languages, 17 countries, and two misadventures to Maria's Meadow later, Rebecca now fills her time writing about and marketing amazing places all over the world. Her travel experiences include studying abroad in Austria and Argentina, as well as backpacking Europe. When not talking up meaningful travel, she can be found playing the piccolo, enjoying the great outdoors of her Vermont home, and planning theme parties.



**Jennifer Bangoura** plans her adventures from her bungalow in Maryland where she lives with her sweet family. From floating down the Niger river in Mali on a passenger steamer to watching the sunrise on a rooftop in Morocco, she's passionate about travel to Francophone Africa and appreciates the tender moments that traveling abroad has to offer. Her favorite artists are Yuna and Stromae, and her dream is to write a book while traveling the Trans-Siberian Railway!



**Sylvia DeMichiel** was born and raised in a small town in Connecticut. She grew up traveling with her family and always had the desire to explore. She struggles with anxiety and depression, but she has never let that deter her from traveling. She is currently in grad school for International Education where her main area of focus is mental health and study abroad. In her free time she enjoys listening to podcasts, reading, and outdoor activities.



← This could be you! Want to share your own travel tips and tales? [Give us a shout!](#)

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# IT'S A MIND GAME: STUDYING ABROAD WITH DEPRESSION

by Jennifer Teeter

**D**epression. Anxiety. Travel. Three words that have had an impact on my college experience and shaped my life.

I have struggled with depression since I was very young. I am sure I was the only fifth-grader in my class that had anxiety attacks and bouts of depression so strong that it prevented me from going to school some days. Over the years I've learned to manage it, thanks to therapy and writing, but it never went away.

**My depression was never the ridiculous commercial kind where I couldn't tie my sneakers or my dog sat staring at me with those sad eyes.** In my experience depression manifests itself as a general sadness, almost grief-like, that you learn to live with. It isn't constant. No, it seeps in like an unwanted house guest, making everything cloudy--an emotional Instagram filter if you will.

Sounds fun, yes? Well imagine taking these "issues" with you to college out of state. It makes conversations with your new roommates...interesting. Over my four years of college I got much better about talking about my anxiety and depression, but not until I returned from study abroad.

It was terrifying making that final decision to go, but doing it made me feel like I was in control of my life, not my depression. Before I signed the paperwork I spoke with my parents, my therapist, and the professor who was leading our study abroad. All of them had sage advice that helped me make the decision. While your therapist and family may already know your fears, telling your professor and the program you are going with seems like a hard thing to do. I promise it's not; it is painless and necessary. Everyone wants to make sure that you are able to enjoy your time abroad and they will do their best to help. Deciding to go is daunting and exhilarating, but the lessons that study abroad teaches you, not just the ones in the classroom, make it worth it.

## Dealing With Depression Abroad

You will find a bunch of advice online about traveling or studying abroad with mental illnesses like depression or anxiety, but most of them are variations on these points:

**If you take medication DO NOT STOP TAKING IT.** That's just a rookie move. Please make this the first thing you pack, and have a copy of your prescription just in case.

**Make sure you have access to Skype, Facebook Messenger, or WhatsApp so you can video chat with your loved ones back home if you need to.** Most programs have wifi in the contracts, but McDonald's is also always an option (speaking from experience here). Thank you Golden Arches!

**Take some photos, a favorite sweatshirt, or even a pillowcase you love.** Take something that is a little piece of home. When I packed for France I thought I would become a fashionista so I consciously didn't pack my favorite pair of sweats and this ended up being one of my biggest regrets.

**Don't be afraid to say no.** Turn down that invitation to the bar if all you want to do is read a book or catch up on Netflix. You do you.

I never realized my need for some alone time until I was on a trip with three of my closest friends, standing on Fleet Street in Dublin when this urge to flee came over me. I needed to not be there. I needed to run. I needed things to be quiet. If I had just spoken up earlier it would have saved me some embarrassment.

**Journal.** It sounds cliché and like something mom would suggest-- mine did. Thanks, Mom! But this is the cheapest form of therapy there is, and in all honesty, you will want to remember everything about your adventures, even the not-so-great parts.

## Life After Study Abroad

Study abroad wasn't all weekend trips to Rome or London. Sure, that was part of it, but a very real, tangible part was the little things that made my time abroad so special. It was dinners with my host family, finding a favorite cafe to call home when I studied for exams, or figuring out how to exercise outside when it's snowing. Study abroad helped me appreciate the little challenges of daily life and how to get through them without getting lost.

Today I still struggle with depression and battle semi-frequent anxiety attacks, but when I am in a battle with myself I have those memories of my adventure abroad. See, study abroad made me stronger, but it also made me aware of how important it is to take care of your mental health.

After college I had a hard time like a lot of post-grads will experience in the first year. When I had the chance to take my first solo trip I jumped on it. I boarded a plane bound for London all by myself. I relied on all the skills and strengths I learned about myself during college and study abroad and as I wandered through London. I talked to strangers for directions (because HELL NO I wasn't paying for an international plan), took tours of Piccadilly Circus, and wandered down Oxford Street for a spot of tea and= a bit of shopping.

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**Depression** tells you that the only way to make it stop is to quit.  
**Anxiety** tells you that you can't handle this.  
**Travel** teaches you that you can.



# 5 STEPS TO TAKE BEFORE TRAVELING ABROAD WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS

by Niki Kraska

You've got your eyes set on travel, just like many of us. You're favorite color is green, just like many of us. And you have a mental illness, just like many of us.

Yup, you read that right. Just because you have a mental illness doesn't mean you have to feel like the lone unicorn in the room when you travel abroad, no matter if you're traveling to [learn a language](#), [volunteer](#), [intern](#), or [study](#). (Don't worry, I thought I was, too.)

Why? Because statistics show that [450 million people in the world have a mental illness](#), and that as many as 1 in 4 people will have a mental or neurological disorder at some point in their lifetime. You definitely aren't the first and won't be the last person to travel abroad with a mental illness - just like there are a number of people who travel with a manageable physical illness (did your cousins asthma hold her back?)

**Just like those traveling with a manageable physical health condition have to properly prepare for their trip ahead, so do you.**

So before you book that plane ticket, here's some steps and advice to take before you travel abroad with a mental illness.

## Step 1 – TALK

**To yourself.** Are you ready? Ask yourself and be honest. Think about where you are in your recovery. If you just started your treatment plan, probably not the best idea to throw yourself into brand new territory right away.

But, if you've reached a more stable place and can recognize and manage your symptoms, then you're more likely to better handle new circumstances and challenges abroad when they arise. Traveling can and should be an enlightening and empowering step in your path of recovery.

**To your doctor.** Now that you've decided you are mentally and emotionally ready to jump across oceans, it's time to talk to your doctor.

A trusted doctor (preferably a psychologist or psychiatrist) will tell you if you are medically ready. Have you just started a new medication? Have you recently suffered a traumatic event? Or have you been clearly making progress over the past six months? You get the picture.

It's important to really listen to your doctor's perspective and talk through questions, concerns, hopes, etc. to come to a conclusion if now is the right time to plan for travel or if waiting a bit longer is a better idea.

**To your family.** Alright, so you've gotten your own approval and your doctor's approval – now comes the hardest of all. Your family's.

Sometimes moms, dads, uncles, aunts, and brothers or sisters, can be the hardest ones to get blessings from (even when you don't have a mental illness). Your safety and wellbeing are going to be at the forefront of their minds, not your excitement about learning how to salsa dance while studying in Latin America. You can't really blame them for that, but you CAN have a mature discussion with them explaining why you (and your doctor) have concluded you are ready to travel abroad.

Let them talk out their concerns and questions, too. You're going to want their support even when you're miles away.

**To yourself again.** Time to check-in. Everyone is on board – make sure you are still on board too. Reflect on the discussions you've had with doctors and family. If all signs are green, let the fun of preparations begin! (Ok it's not all fun. Preparing is actually quite stressful, so make sure you have positive support during this time too!)

## Step 2 – BUY

**Travel health insurance.** No matter who you are, every traveler should have travel health insurance. You never know when an illness or accident can occur, especially in a foreign country. While pre-existing conditions are not usually covered, it still brings peace of mind knowing you won't go into debt from one unplanned hospital visit abroad. One less thing to worry about.

**Enough prescriptions for your trip.** Doctors are able to prescribe a 3-month prescription pretty easily, sometimes even 6-month. Insurance companies are the ones that create a challenge. At times they say no or will charge you a much higher price for a large quantity at a time. If you call in and explain you will be traveling abroad, you can ask for these rules to be waived.

Even if you are going abroad for two weeks, better to pack a little extra as well. If your luggage goes missing or your flight back home gets delayed a few days, you'll have back up to get you by.

**Personal care items.** We all have our "quirks." Fear of flying, germophobia, the list goes on. If you have a long flight, investing in that neck pillow might just make the ride less stressful for you. Heading to a rural village? Don't be ashamed to stock up on soap or hand sanitizer so you can eat with your hands along with everyone else.

Those tiny things that make a big difference in your comfort level are not guaranteed to be everywhere you go. So whatever is going to mentally help you out, go ahead and put one (or 30) in your suitcase.

**Phone service.** If you have access to an unlocked phone, you're gold. Find out if and how you can get a SIM card in your host country so that Google Maps, Uber, etc. will be at your fingertips, A.K.A. make travel less stressful.

Otherwise, buying an international data plan is a smart choice, especially if a part of your travel will be alone or in a small group. Getting stuck somewhere and not being able to call your program leader is a recipe for panic, especially if you don't speak the local language.

Make sure you also have ways to communicate with your loved ones back home, whether it's an international calling card or a family lesson in how to use WhatsApp. Sometimes all you need is a good chat with someone who knows you to bring you back to your A game.



## Step 3 – PREP

**Get a note.** Ask your doctor to write an authorized letter of the prescriptions and medications you are taking. [Customs may decide to question your meds](#), so keeping the prescriptions and note with you avoids a hold up at the airport. Plus, if you need any sort of medical treatment, having this information is handy.

**Do your research.** Certain countries ban certain drugs, so it's important to research your host country's policies. Find out if your medication is available, what the drug name is called, and what you need in order to purchase it (a local doctor's prescription? Proof from a former pill bottle?). Hopefully you are able to take enough with you that this information won't be necessary, but better to be safe.

Also look into what types of mental health resources are available in the region and on your program. Are mental health doctors easy to access? Is there a staff member you can talk to if you are struggling? Just more knowledge to keep in your pocket - maybe it will even help out a friend!

**Remember your coping strategies.** If I travel without hard rock music, it could be bad news. For everyone. We all cope in different ways, and it's these positive coping skills that help us most in the toughest of times. Don't forget to pack your journal, running shoes, sketch pad, or whatever you need when you come home from a hard day.

Sometimes, in the heat of the moment, we can forget what helps or maybe even what triggered us in the first place. Make a list of what you need to feel your best (like a proper night's sleep and exercise each morning) as well as a list of your triggers and risk factors (like alcohol or crowded spaces). Schedules change a lot when you travel, so it's good to have reminders to keep yourself on track.

# Don't forget to pack your journal, running shoes, sketch pad, or whatever you need when you come home from a hard day.

**Make a plan.** What if you do relapse or encounter a triggering event? The best way to prepare yourself is to know what you'll do in advance. Write down the steps you'll take when you realize you are struggling, including who you will turn to for support.

**Share your plan.** In order to hold yourself accountable to this plan, you have to share it. Pick someone you are very comfortable with (mom, your best friend, etc.), who has a good sense of your moods, and who you won't get mad at when they remind you about it (ok, so maybe not mom). Sharing can often reinforce your commitment to the plan, so you may not even need the reminder.

## Step 4 – TALK AGAIN

Can you tell that conversations and checking-in with yourself are important?

Be sure to schedule a final appointment with your doctor before you go, meet up with friends and family who will continue to be sources of support while you are away, and give yourself some last minute pep-talks to tell yourself "you got this!"

Discuss if and who you will tell on your trip. Is there a program leader you can tell in advance? Will you confide in your new flatmate? This is important to consider, especially if you are still in an early stage of your recovery. With the high prevalence of mental illness, if someone else on your program abroad doesn't also have a mental health condition, it's highly likely there are at least a few that know someone who does. Hopefully, that makes it easier to find someone to open up to.



## Step 5 – HAVE THE ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME

Sure, planning may take a little bit more effort and time than for others, but that, in fact, is what is going to ensure your experience abroad is everything you ever wanted and more! Get on that airplane knowing you are fully prepared for the unseen and unknown that lie ahead. Who know's – this could be just what the doctor didn't order (you did!) for a great [big step forward in your life ahead](#).

# WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO ME WHILE TRAVELING WITH MY MENTAL ILLNESS?

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by Jennifer Bangoura

**T**raveling the world can be thrilling, exciting, and will open your mind to completely different ways of life. It can also be incredibly stressful, overwhelming, and trigger mental health issues you may currently be experiencing, or that you previously experienced. If you're traveling abroad with a mental illness, you will still have all the joys and excitement of being abroad, though you will need to take certain precautions in order to ensure your mental health and comfort are maintained.

Fortunately, with our interconnected world, you won't need to worry about getting in touch with a trusted medical professional or friend while traveling abroad, should the need arise. Preparation, however, is the best medicine when it comes to planning for the unknown. It's important to consider all your options before you reach the gate to board your international flight.

Whether you're studying, volunteering, interning, teaching, or getting your TEFL certification abroad, addressing your mental health, will be essential to ensuring your success abroad.

**We've put together a list of the best resources you'll have access to while traveling so you can be your best you.**

## Friends & Family Back Home

Do you have anyone's phone number memorized? The only numbers I know by heart are my parent's landline, which has been the same for over 25 years, and my partner's cell phone number. But, what if I couldn't connect with them or I needed to speak to someone else while traveling abroad?

Before you head abroad, make sure to update your friends' and family members' contact information in a cloud-based platform like [Postable](#) so you can access the information wherever you are. While you may have everyone's phone numbers and addresses programmed into your phone, you may not have access to it or a quick and easy way to contact them. If you're especially nervous about how you may react to your new living situation, establish a weekly or bi-weekly time to check in with a close family member or friend who can help you process your living situation and make sure you're taking care of yourself as best you can. They're your best support system and resource at home, going abroad doesn't necessarily change that.

## New Friends From Your Program

One of the best parts about traveling abroad is the new friends you will make who will understand your travel experience like no one else. While it may feel like middle school all over again as you meet this new group of people going through an intense experience with you, you will quickly find someone who understands you best, and you shouldn't feel afraid to lean on them in times of need. In fact, they might need someone to lean on as well and may be looking for someone to help them adjust to life abroad, too.

## In-Country Staff

While traveling abroad with a mental illness you may need more professional support and the assurance that what you share will remain confidential. In this case, you can turn to your program staff based in country who are trained to listen to their participants and address their needs, including those related to mental illness.

If you feel comfortable, talk with a trusted staff member early on and flag any potential concerns you may have or ask them how past participants have addressed particular triggers you may have. It's likely they will know coping strategies for many of the needs you have and can help you identify ways to overcome obstacles to you having the best experience abroad possible. You can also check out [these self-care tips](#) to help you mitigate or prevent emotionally, or physically, stressful situations.

## Program Staff Back Home

Prior to leaving your home country, you may have bonded with your program provider representative. This person likely spent a good deal of time helping you to decide which program would be a best fit for you and they have your best interests at heart. If you are still in touch with them and need to connect with someone who understands both where you're coming from and where you currently are (both physically and mentally), then reach out to them to touch base and seek advice as to how you can work through your mental illness abroad. If they can't help you, they will certainly be able to point you in the right direction of someone who can.

## Your University

If you're on a university-supported program then you will have access to all the mental health services provided to any university student. Make sure to note the contact information for your university's counseling center before you go so you can reach out to the staff if needed. Whether it's an emergency or a check-in to ensure you are maintaining your mental health as best you can while traveling abroad, it's important to remember that reaching out for help is a sign of strength.

## Your Doctor

Depending on the severity of your mental illness and the stressors or triggers you may encounter on your travels, it's always a good idea to have your primary care physician's number close at hand before you travel abroad. Your doctor can provide you the prescriptions you may need before you travel abroad as well as a letter to confirm why you are carrying certain medicine abroad and that you have the right to do so. Discuss with your doctor how long you plan on being abroad to make sure you have enough of the medications you will need – and some extra in case of delays or rerouting.

## Your Therapist

Finally, if you have a therapist at home then you should meet before you travel to establish how you can communicate if needed while traveling abroad. He or she may have a special number for international clients and it's important to understand how or if your insurance will cover international sessions before you arrive at that point. While talking with your family and friends may be helpful up to a certain point, some conversations are best had with a professional. If you're struggling to maintain your mental health while traveling abroad, reach out to your therapist for the help you need. [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) provides guidance for those traveling with mental illness for what you should do before, during, and after you travel abroad.

While the stigma surrounding mental illness continues to exist, we are lucky to live in a time where groups like the [World Health Organization](#), universities, and study abroad providers are becoming more aware of the prevalence of mental illness and are [providing tools](#) to address many of the situations travelers may face that can be triggers. If you're traveling abroad with a mental illness know that there are numerous resources for [how to travel with mental illness](#) and even more [tips to stay mentally healthy while traveling](#).

Traveling abroad can highlight the best, and most difficult, facets of our health – both physically and mentally. Just as you would train for an athletic event, it is similarly important to prepare for your time abroad with your mental health at the forefront.

# Traveling abroad can highlight the best, and most difficult, facets of our health—both physically and mentally.



# IS IT CULTURE SHOCK? OR IS IT DEPRESSION/ ANXIETY?

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by Rebecca Murphy



**C**ulture shock is the ultimate travel headache. Take the airline losing your luggage, plus your host brother loving Nickelback, plus breaking your new shoe on those damn cobblestone streets, and culture shock is worse than that. However, it is a necessary thing that everyone goes through when becoming immersed in a new region. If you don't go through culture shock while studying, interning, volunteering, or teaching abroad, it probably means you're not immersed enough, so in a weird way, you should be pumped that you're feeling down because it means you're doing something right!

Despite it being a rite of passage, experiencing culture shock can really throw even the most stable people and experienced travelers off, and it can be tricky to tell if there is a more serious issue underneath. Some symptoms of culture shock can even mimic depression and anxiety, making it difficult to tell if there is a bigger problem or just something that will eventually pass. So, how do you tell the difference and figure out if you're having an episode (if you've been diagnosed), developing a disorder (if you haven't been diagnosed), or are just confused, sad, and experiencing a combination of hormonal/exhausted/brain-on-overload?

## What Is Culture Shock?

Imagine coming from rural, cold New England (and having never really left New England), kissing your parents goodbye in the midst of a snowstorm, then arriving 14 hours later at one of the busiest, dirtiest, and hottest airports in the world where everyone around you is yelling at their screaming children in a language you don't understand, and pushing up against you on all sides. Buh-bye personal space. This is the very first encounter with the confusing, elusive, and straight up obnoxious thing that is culture shock. Buckle up!

**Culture shock is the feeling of disorientation brought on by experiencing an unfamiliar culture, lifestyle, or set of attitudes.** In other words, when you pack up your life, fly halfway around the world, and try to immediately immerse in a totally different culture, you can obviously expect to feel completely out of place and stick out like a sore thumb. To expect anything different would be delusional.



When you travel or move to a new region, your daily routine, attitudes of people around you, and overall environment are completely different, and the process of recognizing, comprehending, and eventually adapting to these differences is the foundation of culture shock.

In our comfortable environment, our behavior, tone of voice, hand gestures, body language, and social cues all come from the culture we're born into. We take the automatic understanding of these things for granted because we don't have to pay attention to them – but that doesn't mean that they're not there. In a new culture, we have a heightened sense of awareness to these parts of life because they are so unfamiliar and confusing to us. Everyone expects to feel out of place linguistically or physically if they're in a different country, but most people don't expect to not understand basic parts of life like hand signals, how to wait in lines, or how to greet someone. These subtleties, which can be so unexpected that it feels like you've literally hit a wall when you experience them, are the reasons why it's called "culture shock" and not "culture hug and warm greetings".

For some people, they experience culture shock right from touchdown at the airport and then maybe not again until a month later when they are trying to buy feminine products at the corner market and the man behind the counter yells at them. Luckily for most of us, there are four definitive stages of culture shock that we travelers follow:

### 1. Honeymoon (Initial Euphoria)

When you first arrive in a new place, everything you see and do will be exciting, foreign, and endearing. It is totally normal to get caught up in all the wonderful things your new home has to offer and see right over any potential annoyances. You'll want to 'gram every meal that looks slightly different than what you're used to. You'll find the morning traffic jams to be funny because your usual definition of traffic is being stuck behind a tractor. You might even have competitions with your new friends over who has the most mosquito bites from sleeping without screens.

You'll be charmed by every difference rather than bothered and quick to recognize any cultural similarities to avoid feeling too out of your comfort zone right away.

### 2. Anxious (Irritation & Hostility)

This euphoria will wear away quickly. You'll become agitated at simple things being so different. Maybe you'll get really lost in your new home because you can't read the street signs. You won't understand why you have to buy bus passes at the post office but the post office is never open. You'll just want to grab a quick cup of coffee but forget that your new culture only does sit-down coffee, and secretly/guiltily wish there was a Starbucks nearby. You will hate that you feel all of this anger and sadness at what was just a few weeks ago so new and exciting, and you won't know where to place it all, so you'll probably find yourself sobbing into your webcam at your mom or girlfriend or cat who is 10,000 miles away about how *you just want a large chai latte and to ride the city bus without accidentally ending up in another country, dammit!*

### 3. Adjustment (Gradual Understanding)

Eventually, everything will start to click into place. Things that used to be so foreign and confusing will become routine, and your life will have balance once again. Rather than feeling annoyed or disgruntled that something doesn't go your way, you'll understand why it doesn't and make more of an effort to learn about these factors that make cultures different. You might even come to enjoy that something is different. Maybe you used to hate that salads were dressed with only spices and olive oil, but now you can't imagine eating it drenched in Ranch dressing. You'll start to enjoy being forced to sit down and drink your coffee because you always meet someone new. You are firm, though, that you'll never be a Nickelback fan, no matter how much your host brother blasts them every Saturday morning.

### 4. Mastery (Adaptation/Biculturalism)

This is the final stage in your transformation of "Becoming a Local 101". You'll feel a high sense of comfort in your new home, you can throw out your maps and talk to strangers with ease, and language barriers aren't a problem anymore (except for screaming children because no one can understand kids yelling in foreign languages). You will still have moments of homesickness and confusion, but your new friends, host family, and daily activities will become part of your life, and you won't be able to imagine doing things any other way. What were you thinking, not using a bidet before? So barbaric.

### How Should I Deal With Culture Shock?

Push through. It is definitely easier said than done, but culture shock is not going to just go away if you hide out in your new apartment binge-watching *Orange Is the New Black*. You have to throw yourself into uncomfortable situations and experience as much of the new culture as you can in the hopes that someday soon these situations will become comfortable. Meet people, explore everything, read and watch the local news, party until 6am just like the locals, and stuff your face with all of the Nutella or dulce de leche you can find. Everything will click into place eventually, so in the meantime, ride the wave!

### Is it Something More?

If you've gone through months of ups and downs and feel like you're just stuck on one of the phases of culture shock with no "aha" moments, there is a possibility that it's more than just an adjustment period. Ultimately, culture shock is temporary and it simply takes time to adjust to something totally new. If you feel like you're not adjusting or everything new is too much, maybe it's more than a fleeting discomfort.

### Recognizing Depression/Anxiety While Abroad

Depression and anxiety while abroad are more common than people like to admit. It's hard to complain when you've spent the whole day lounging in the European countryside and get to go home to your castle-view new apartment, but for people with depression or anxiety, even the most amazing things can be drowned out by emotion. It's easy for people battling this type of disorder to feel guilty, spoiled, or even confused for being down even when they're "living the high life" abroad, so they keep their feelings to themselves and hide the problem, potentially ruining their time abroad.

Chances are, if you think you're developing depression or anxiety while abroad, you've probably been feeling some of these things for a long time, but nothing has made them surface quite like going abroad does. It's crucial to deal with the problem as you first begin to notice it and take self-care seriously while abroad, as they aren't feelings that are going to be magically fixed (but that doesn't mean they can't be fixed with a little effort!).

Illnesses like depression and anxiety are different for everyone, but ultimately you will need to take similar steps to make it more bearable while abroad. Start by talking to your family back home, program director, or school guidance counselor and have them help you speak with your host family, find a suitable doctor and/or therapist while abroad, and work through any international treatment or insurance issues. You are not the first person to go abroad with baggage (in fact most people go abroad with too much baggage!), and there are people available and programs set up to help those who need it.

At the end of the day, regardless of if you're merely experiencing culture shock or if you're battling a more serious issue, talk to someone. The best thing you can do is acknowledge the problem and get someone with more authority involved to help you work through it. You're abroad in what probably is an amazing place and it would be incredibly unfortunate to spend the entire time you're there feeling miserable and helpless. There are ways to conquer whatever the issue is, so don't be afraid to be vocal. After all, you are part of the truly tiny percentage of people who throw themselves into a brand new culture, so there has to be some part of you that is confident enough to put this on yourself. You can do this, and while you might doubt yourself sometimes, you ultimately know you're strong enough. There's a reason why you didn't just stay home!

**The best thing you can do is acknowledge the problem and get someone with more authority involved to help you work through it.**



## THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICING SELF-CARE ABROAD

by Charleen Johnson Stoeber

There's a very extroverted, go-getter narrative in travel and international education, and why shouldn't there be? Studying abroad takes guts, and it requires you to jump into the unknown. With all of the travel apps, Facebook groups, and travel guides out there, it has become easier than ever to know what to expect from traveling before you even go abroad. Taking care of your mental health while studying abroad is as important as knowing what to pack or how to speak the language, but it isn't so easy to anticipate what low points will look and feel like.

Practicing self-care is super important, but, like mental illness, it is often stigmatized. Often times we don't know if we "deserve" to seek counseling or to take self-care days because we don't want to be seen as weak. I've learned the importance of taking care of my mental health and being vocal about it in order to normalize mental health days. The fact that this article needs to be written is enough of an indicator that we don't break the ice about mental health enough. Self-care is even more important for students and travelers who suffer from anxiety disorders or depression.

**We cannot be our best selves without taking care of ourselves.**



Whether you've never seen a counselor or have yours on speed dial, just being aware of your mental health needs will help you capitalize on your study abroad experience. Here are some self-care tips to help you cope with the inevitable ups and downs of studying abroad:

## Invest in Mental Health Days

Everyone has different self-care needs. Some of us need one hour a week, while others need more. Take at least one to two days a month to practice self-care, whatever that looks like for you, and remember that mental health days look different for each individual. I used to go on two-hour runs in the States on weekends, but in Nicaragua, running in a small city full of smog, honking horns, and street harassment isn't nearly as relaxing as it was for me at home.

Now, I only run at 6 a.m. on weekends when things are quieter. I still run because I enjoy feeling accomplished, but I've turned to other self-care methods to stay happy abroad too.

About once a month, I'll go get a \$5 pedicure done by a 17-year-old high school student. We'll talk for two hours about what it's like in my country, and she'll tell me about her family and her studies. Then, I'll go to the only hotel in town with a pool and pay \$5 for a day pass. I'll turn on some music (jazz is relaxing and country reminds me of home) and swim, then I'll do some journaling on the terrace with a panoramic view of my city. I leave feeling rejuvenated.

## Write About It

After a hectic day, journaling helps me decompress and make sense of things. I jot down how I'm feeling, then ask myself why I feel sad or happy. *Do I feel sad because a friend who visited from home just left? Do I feel happy because one of my students came over for three hours to draw with me? What can I do about the sadness, and how can I keep doing the things that make me happy?*

Writing letters I'll never send is also therapeutic. Sometimes, expressing myself is more important than being heard. I've written letters to myself and to people who I can't or shouldn't talk to, just to get it out. I've found that with all the free time I've had living abroad, my mind brings back dormant memories (both good and bad) that I was too busy to really comprehend back home.

Writing letters or in my journal helps me let go of the negative and to keep it private, while I write about the positive aspects of my travels on my blog. It's more productive for me to share most of the ups with my friends and family, and spare them the downsides, because I want them to know that my experience is worth the roller coaster ride.

## Join a Group

Whether you volunteer at an English center or join a Tuesday night salsa class, joining a group is a great way to find consistency in your not-so-consistent life. After the honeymoon phase of studying abroad ends and things stop seeming so amazingly perfect, frustrations will start to set in. You'll wonder why it's so hard to understand what the corner store owner is asking you as you're buying gum. It's normal to ask yourself things like "What am I even doing here?", "Why is it so hard to find stable Wifi?", "Why can't anyone understand me on the phone?", or "Why do people stare at me as if I have two heads?"

You will feel out of place. It's natural. The good news is that you do have some control over this feeling by being proactive and joining a daily or weekly group. I've started taking free sign language classes on Saturdays, during which I don't feel like a fish out of water and I can learn a language in a quiet environment. It's also a great chance to see friends.

## Be Creative

Studying abroad exposes you to a new cultures and languages, pushing you to use parts of your brain that may be lying dormant until you walk out of the airport and hear everyone gabbing in French. Now that you have to be creative in navigating life abroad and living, speaking, and listening differently, why not use this creativity to your advantage? Maybe you wanted to pick up the guitar, but didn't have time with that pre-med course load you had in college. Now that you're abroad, why not pick up lessons and write a few songs?

Being creative is all about expressing yourself, and you don't have to be the next Jimi Hendrix to do it. It could be as simple as sitting in a park and sketching a fountain, or as meditative as making a collage with photos of your friends back home. I like to sketch and paint portraits of the Nicaraguans I've met, whether they're my students, my host grandma, or my neighbor. It's fun discovering which of my students are also budding artists.

## Exercise...Or Not

After a long-distance breakup, I was so depressed that I didn't want to exercise. I usually go crazy without a daily workout. I had to be okay with not being okay for a while, but eventually, I made myself go to a Zumba class because I remembered how much I loved dancing. Those Zumba classes were the highlight of my day, because it felt like I was clubbing with the lights on. Seeing the other people around me having fun and shaking it off made me feel better, if only for an hour a day.

The fact that I felt emotionally better after a workout highlights an undeniable body-mind connection. I've been hard on myself for not wanting to exercise, but then I remind myself that I need to listen to my body. When I don't feel like exercising, I'll just stretch for a bit to get the blood flowing, then I'll do a healthy alternative like reading.



## Plan a Trip to Look Forward to

I almost always have a trip planned, whether it's a day hike with my best friend or a trip to Colombia. After I've had a bad day, it's comforting to know that I have a fun trip planned to put things into perspective. It's something to look forward to that keeps me motivated and moving. The excitement leading up to the trip is akin to the adrenaline rush I feel during my travels. Study abroad programs often plan group excursions, that range from museum visits to hiking trips, so mark these in your calendar!

## Write Hand-Written Letters

"I'd rather get an email than a beautiful postcard from Rio de Janeiro" said no one, ever. When was the last time you received a handwritten letter? It's an old fashioned gesture that never goes out of style. Your loved ones will be thrilled not only to hear from you, but to receive a tangible memento of your study abroad destination. Giving feels just as good as receiving, and after they get your postcards, chances are they'll be excited to send you a care package full of chocolate bars and other treats you didn't know would be so hard to find.

## Use Your Programs Resources

Some programs have counselors who can help you navigate culture shock and keep you mentally healthy. Your program's staff members are there to support you, whether you just need to talk through a bad day or you need help dealing with culture shock. The hardest step is reaching out for help, but once you do, you won't regret it. Don't treat your resources like an emergency room because it's never a good idea to wait until the last minute to get help

You are one of 4.5 million people studying abroad, and you definitely wouldn't be the first to reach out. Keep telling yourself that if you need to!

Everyone's version of self-care is different, whether it's staying in bed watching House of Cards or spending the day at the beach. Taking care of your mental health is one of the most crucial yet underrated strategies to ensure you have the best study abroad journey. If you or someone you know is going through a rough time abroad, share these tips with them. It shouldn't be a revolutionary idea to take care of yourself, but until articles like this one are no longer needed, let's keep normalizing self-care. You keep doing you, boo.

# Everyone's version of self-care is different...



# TRIGGERS AND TRAVEL: MANAGING YOUR MENTAL ILLNESS ABROAD

by Charleen Johnson Stoeber

*Note: This article refers to the Western definition of mental illness. Check with your mental health professional about how travel may affect your mental illness treatment plan abroad.*

**S**o, you have a mental illness. Just like you won't always let that stop you from getting out of bed, you're not letting that stop you from seeing the world. Travel is a challenge, and I'm not talking about how tough it can be to hike Mount Kenya. If you're interning abroad, you might not have comforts like drive-thru medication pickup. Teaching abroad comes with challenges like oversized classrooms that you might not be so used to. The stress and adrenaline of traveling can amplify triggers and other pre-existing problems, or it can create new ones.

[Going abroad offers a physical escape for your previous life](#), but your complex mind is inescapable. The change in scenery may be refreshing, but the intensity and novelty of flying overseas can be rough. Your mere survival, though, is a feat in a world that stigmatizes mental illness. Now that you're going abroad, let's talk about adapting your self-care. Everyone's mental health is affected in different contexts, whether you're a Latina rejecting social stigmas or a queer person dealing with bi erasure. Here are tips for managing your mental illness while abroad. You've got this!

## What to Know Before Traveling

First, going abroad can lead anyone to feel loss and anxiety with regard to separation and uncertainty. Whether you're taking on depression, an eating disorder, or bipolar disorder, it's important to know that your feelings and triggers may lower, stay the same, or amplify. You're not alone, though. [16.8 percent of U.S. college students with mental illnesses have studied abroad](#)— close to the same amount (17.1 percent) as their peers.

Seemingly dormant issues may arise in unexpected ways. When I lived abroad, I was assaulted on a run. I never used to look behind me on runs until that happened to me, but hey, that's what happens when you have PTSD.

Now when I exercise outside, I'm triggered by simple little things like shadows behind me or the sudden sound of rustling leaves. I know that my body's natural defense mechanism is doing what it's gotta do to keep me safe, but it adds mental weight. I didn't expect these triggers to apply to my bike rides, though. Even when visiting my safe home town, I would still look behind me every couple of minutes. Has my PTSD put an extra weight on my travels? Every day. Does it stop me from traveling? No.

While it's true that [travel can hurt you if you have a mental illness](#), let's talk about the upsides. When you set foot in your new country and you wonder why people don't flush toilet paper, that my friend, is called culture shock. It doesn't have to be shocking in a bad way. There's a honeymoon stage to arriving in a new country. You love hearing the accordions playing in the street, and you don't understand what anyone is saying, but you're finally free.

However wonderful you may feel, don't quit taking the Zoloft (or any other medications you're taking!). This may lead to a crisis that may lead you to be hospitalized or even sent home. If you are able to keep anything consistent, keep up with your meds. Research your new destination's time zone so that you avoid confusion regarding when to take your meds, too.

**While you're traveling, follow these tips:**

### Recognize and Track Your Progress

Tracking your progress is such an important tool. Whether you're journaling about your day or writing down a list of things that make you happy, the point is for you to document your feelings and reflect on them in a constructive way. Also, print and fill out [Mary Ellen Copeland's free WRAP plan](#). It comes with simple questions like "What triggers me?", "How can I limit my triggers or cope with them once they arise?" You're asked to sign the plan in front of two witnesses who support you.

Using tracking tools like this one will help you remember the bigger picture instead of focusing on one triggering event, and it's comforting to know that other people are aware of your plan so that you're more likely to follow through with it.

### Seek Help

Ask your program provider if they have a mental health professional you could either see in person or call. If not, research if you're able to access one in your new country.

You could also start a relationship with one, if you haven't already, before you leave. Tune into the next free [Abroad With Disabilities Skype session](#) for anyone with questions about studying abroad with a disability. Starting or participating in a mental illness peer support group is a great way to find community, too.

### Share Your Stories

Social media can be a powerful tool for staying in touch with family and friends back home. Starting a blog will help you stay focused on the positive aspects of being abroad that you want to share with others. I can journal as much as I want to vent, but I try to blog about two or three positives for every negative. When I have blogged about my assaults, I frame posts so as to let people know what happened and how yes, these events were horrible, but that I'm moving forward. Blogging about traumatic events isn't for everyone, but it's helped me cope and connect with others while I heal.

### Managing Your Mental Health

As you well know, you are not your mental illness. Every day comes with unpredictable hurdles that you overcome, so **here are some general tips for different disorders:**

**Depression:** Be gentle with yourself. When we travel, it's easy for us to feel luckier than those who can't do so. It puts pressure on us to make the most of traveling, but this can make us feel not we're not enjoying ourselves enough. It's okay if sights don't appeal to you in the same way they did on Instagram. If you're not blown away by the World's Largest Ferris Wheel in Singapore and you'd rather stay in and watch Netflix instead, that's fine. Be aware of that voice in your head that's trying to guilt trip you into thinking you're not having a "good enough" time or for "having too much fun."



*I try to take care of my mental health anywhere, even in paradise. Travel can make me feel free, but my complex mind carries with it hundreds of emotions, both negative and positive. When I feel a panic attack coming on, I countdown with my five senses. I notice five things I see, four things I feel, three things I hear, two things I smell, and one thing I taste. It reminds me that every second of the day is so much more than just a countdown of things I experience (and that if I can't taste anything, I can think of chocolate). This process, along with taking at least three slow breaths, helps ground me.*

**Bipolar Disorder:** Be as intentional as you possibly can about maintaining your routines in order to keep mood swings at bay. A consistent, daily sleeping routine is one of the best strategies you can use. How do you do this when traveling comes with so many new challenges? First, find out what your new country's time difference is. Julie Fast, an author with bipolar disorder, says that she will research her destination's time zone and adjust her sleeping schedule accordingly to avoid mood swings (yes, that might mean going to bed at 7 a.m. and waking up at 4 a.m.).

**Anxiety:** Panic attacks come on from a variety of factors while traveling, such as getting lost or having a flight cancelled. In order to manage your anxiety continue the routines that make you feel safe and stable at home, but adapt them to your new place.

One thing that helps me manage my anxiety is to journal exactly how I'm feeling. I'll even write a letter to myself to calm myself down. When you're abroad, unexpected things happen. When the power goes out at night and I can't journal, I'll make sure to keep my devices charged so I can at least listen to This American Life podcasts in the dark.

**Eating disorder:** The feeling of having or losing control is what dominates eating disorders. While your eating disorder won't leave you with the stamp of a passport, know that you're not alone. Find support groups, like Eating Disorders Anonymous, through which you can even organize Skype calls to talk about your worries and accomplishments with someone qualified. ANAD is another organization to look into. Support exists worldwide, so do your research and meet with someone near you (or online!).

There are far more disorders than I've mentioned. Some are stigmatized more than others, but don't let the stigma stop you from pursuing your dream to see the world. Take care of you, and not the you that you feel you're perceived as. If it doesn't work out, you can always go home. With proper preparation and self awareness of potential triggers, most travelers with mental health issues can still gain immensely rewarding experiences from traveling. So, get out there and be good to yourself!

*Special thanks to Sylvia for her time, effort, and teachings as I put together this article.*

# Be good to yourself!

# UNDERSTAND & MANAGE YOUR MENTAL ILLNESS: RECOMMENDED BOOKS & RESOURCES

by Sylvia DeMichiel

Sometimes, when I'm planning to travel, I think I will be good—no anxiety, no depression. I will be happy and carefree—that is definitely not always the case. I learned my lesson through my trips in the past, locally and globally. Something turn to for support are books. Books open you up to a new world and a new set of ideas just like traveling does. I struggled with depression when I studied abroad in Peru and I turned to "The Dresden Files" series by Jim Butcher. It offered me an escape by seeing how Harry Dresden handled the ordeals of his life. It made me feel less alone and like I could handle the next few months of my program.

Below is a list of books hot off my personal best seller and recommended list. Some are novels, some are biographies or memoirs, and some are activity books. All these books can offer a different perspective of how to understand and manage your mental health or mental illness while you are abroad. Not every book will be a match for you or your mental illness. Some books might speak to you more than others. That's okay! Just look for something that will work for you the most.

## "Reasons to Stay Alive" – Matt Haig

Matt Haig suffered from crippling depression for a few years. He shares his story about managing his depression, what helped him get through it, and what continues to help him daily. He writes with honesty and rawness that makes him easy to connect to and identify with. There's even a specific chapter on traveling to Paris with his depression and anxiety. It's a great resource for ideas of how to take care of yourself and not feel alone when you are traveling.

## "Start Where You Are" – Meera Lee Patel

## "How to Be an Explorer of the World" – Keri Smith

Both of these books make it easier to take the time to appreciate where you are and what you are doing and their easy to bring abroad. Some of the activities include making lists, collecting items, drawing, talking, etc. They can help you become more self-aware and truly take advantage of your opportunity to travel.

## "Get Headspace: How Mindfulness Can Change Your Life in Ten Minutes A Day" – Andy Puddicombe

This book is a great introduction to the idea of [mindfulness](#). This book was introduced to me by one of my therapists, and I was completely immersed. It made the concept easier to understand and explained why it would be such a helpful strategy. It goes through the definitions, practicing and integrating mindfulness into everyday life, and how to start. There is also an app that you can use along with the book. It is free for the first ten days so you can try it. This is an easy book to bring with you and you can practice mindfulness anywhere you are!

## "Nobody is Ever Missing" – Catherine Lacey

This novel was my everything. It helped me so much recently. This book is about a woman who leaves her life behind in the United States and travels to New Zealand without telling anyone. This book describes her unraveling in New Zealand. It really spoke to me and made me feel a little less alone.

## Pretty Much Anything by Brené Brown

Brené Brown has numerous books out ("I Thought It Was Just Me," "The Gifts of Imperfection," "Daring Greatly," and "Rising Strong"). They all focus on vulnerability, shame, and the idea of enoughness. If you want to get a feel about some of the ideas and strategies she discusses, I suggest watching one of her TED Talks.

## Memoirs in General

Memoirs are a great way to understand one person's experience with a mental illness. It is a great opportunity to learn how others dealt with their own struggles. Here are just a few recommendations, I noted which mental health condition each book addresses.

- "The Quiet Room" by Lori Schiller, Amanda Bennett - Schizophrenia
- "The Noonday Demon" by Andrew Solomon - Depression
- "Furiously Happy" by Jenny Lawson - Depression, Anxiety
- "My Age of Anxiety" by Scott Stosell - Anxiety
- "The Man Who Couldn't Stop" - David Adam - OCD
- "Irritable Hearts" by Mac McClelland - PTSD

There are so many more out there. Take a look around at your local bookstore or do some research online. Everyone's experience will be different, but these books can help you feel less alone and give you a different outlook.

## "Hyperbole and a Half" – Allie Brosh

This is a comic book. You might be familiar with [Allie's blog under the same name](#). This book has one chapter specifically focusing on depression. Her comics make it relatable if you are struggling with depression or have in the past. This is just another recommended book to help you feel less alone and hopefully have you cracking up. She's just so funny! Her other chapters focus on other topics including dogs and childhood. If this book speaks to you, you can even keep updated by subscribing to the blog.

## "WRAP" (Wellness Recovery Action Plan) – Mary Ellen Copeland

This is a workbook created by Mary Ellen Copeland who has Bipolar Disorder. It is a self-designed wellness plan. This includes wellness tools, daily maintenance, and triggers. This plan can be adapted when you go abroad. I have my own WRAP Book and WRAP Plan that I use daily. They have different type of workbooks depending on your needs.

## "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...and it's All Small Stuff" – Richard Carlson

This is a simple book that has a workbook to go along with it if you wish. It is filled with basic mantras that can guide you in your time abroad. I personally use this as a guide. It contains helpful reminders for living life. Some of my favorites are: "Set aside quiet time, every day" and "Develop your own helping rituals". Find the ones that work for you and speak to you. I write them on tiny post it notes and put them throughout my apartment, work space, and planner.

## “I am Here Now” – The Mindfulness Project

This book was suggested to me by another therapist. This book is filled with different activities to help bring mindfulness to your everyday life. They go over mindfulness games, meditation notes, and a guide in how to use the book. This is an easy book to bring with you on your travels and bring you to the present moment if anything comes up.

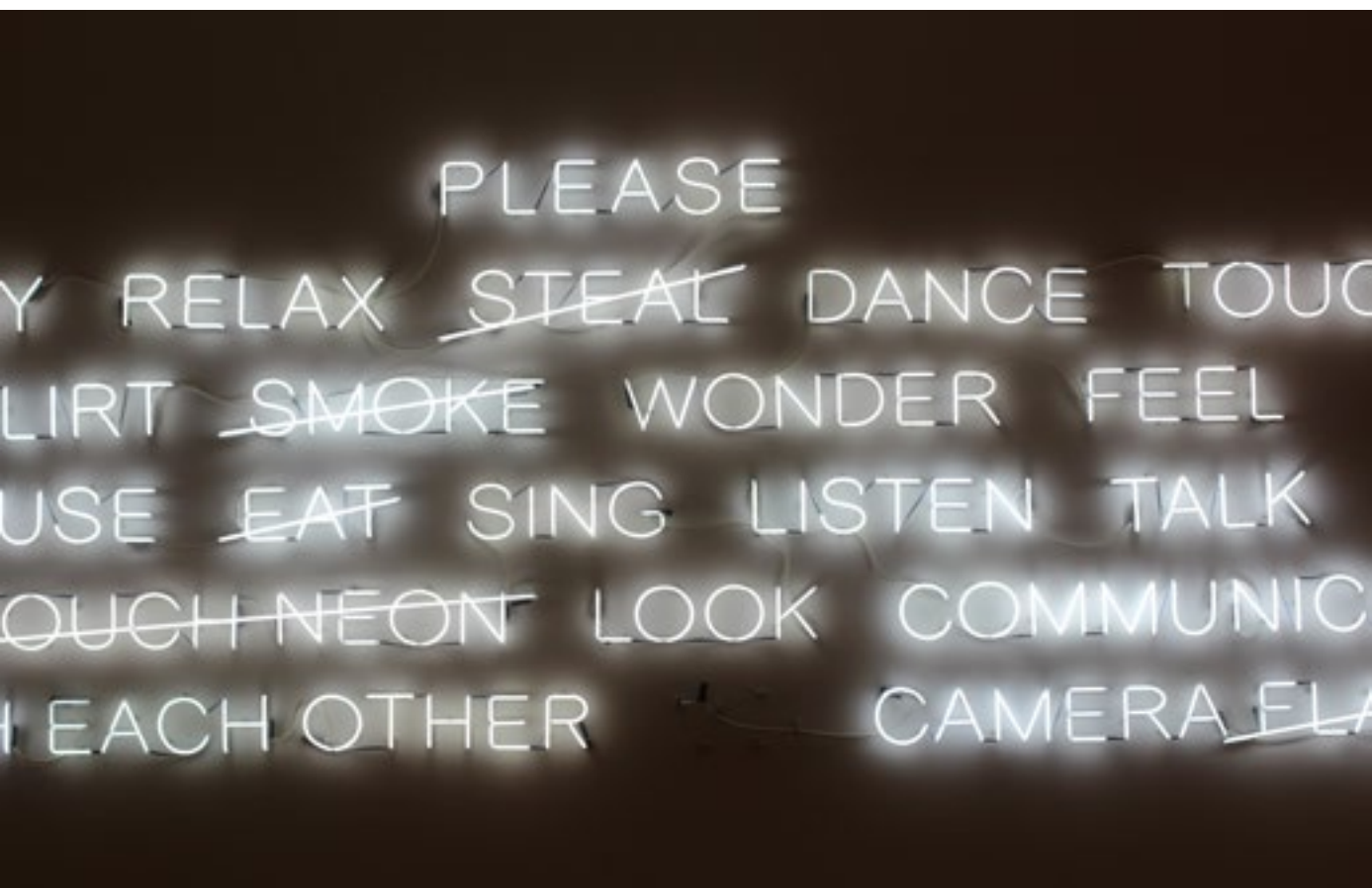
Just like with music, movies, novels, poems, and any kind of art: not everything will speak to you or apply to you. That’s okay! What works for someone else isn’t always supposed to work for you. Do a little pre-reading reading to research what sounds like a good book or resource for you to take with you on your travels. After all, [books make the best travel companions!](#)

*Thank you to friends who have recommended these books to be in the past.*



**“Whenever you read a good book,  
somewhere in the world a door  
opens to allow in more light.”**

–Vera Nazarian



# EATING DISORDERS, TRAVEL, AND RECOVERY

by Niki Kraska

Travelers come in all shapes, sizes, colors, backgrounds, personalities, and medical histories, and all of these things impact the way we travel.

Take me, for example – I am a 5ft 8in woman (I stand out in large crowds); I am multi-ethnic, though I physically look white (and deal with the respective stereotypes); I am a hard worker (great for volunteering!) who also loves to play and daydream; and I manage daily an autoimmune disease (I have to get good sleep), anxiety (I have to calm my panicking mind), and life in recovery from an eating disorder (read on).

**No matter how hard I try, I can't pretend that crossing a border leaves all of this behind.**

My autoimmune disease and anxiety disorder are chronic, but stable; I can take meds daily and manage them. I don't necessarily want to take meds, and I won't forever, but right now for traveling, it helps.

The eating disorder (ED) is different. There isn't a medication specifically for eating disorders. Maybe something for the depression or anxiety can help, but it doesn't treat your disorder or keep you in recovery. It's up to you to keep yourself there.

I write this now eating disorder free and loving it, but it was a journey to get here. Treatment started in 2007, followed by relapses, the beginning of recovery (treatment does not simply equal recovery), finding stability so I could study abroad in 2009, slips, volunteering in Guatemala in 2010, and then ending treatment in 2011 when I finally could say that I was fully healthy again.

Even in sustained recovery, though, distorted thoughts and triggering events happen, and they happen as well when you travel.

If you're considering taking your first solo (or small group) trip abroad, or are getting back out on the road after successful treatment, here's some important information to consider about travel and eating disorder recovery.



**Note:** *If you have an eating disorder and have not received treatment, the mental, emotional, and physical risks of participating in a travel abroad program far outweigh the benefits. I strongly recommend prioritizing your health and seeking treatment before deciding to travel abroad.*

## Why You Should Not Travel Abroad If You Are Still In The Thick Of Your Ed

Regardless of the amount of time spent in treatment, if you still live with recurrent episodes of eating disorder symptoms (i.e. restricting, bingeing, purging, etc.), travel is not the best answer. Beyond the more obvious health risks and chance of the disorder becoming worse, traveling "in symptom" only takes away from your experience. Rather than being present to your studies or your service, the disorder will have a hold over you and will cloud your ability to take in all that your trip abroad has to offer – new opportunities, new friends, new foods, new perspectives, and more.

Since there's no one-size-fits-all treatment for an ED, it can take time to figure out the right combination of therapy style, medication, and medical and nutritional support you need. Disrupting your treatment by leaving to go abroad too soon only leaves you vulnerable to relapse and/or an even longer road to recovery.



## So When Is The Right Time To Travel Abroad?

Great question! A quick checklist:

- Are my symptoms under control?
- Is my health stabilized?
- Have I been making progress in recovery for a sustained amount of time?
- Do I feel properly supported?
- Does the thought of travel bring joy and excitement (not fear or anxiety)?

Do yourself a HUGE favor and be honest with yourself as you answer these. If you just started treatment a month ago, probably not the best time to head out on your own. But if you've found a treatment team and plan that is working for you and you've been able to reach a stable place in your path to recovery, then talking to your doctor about traveling abroad is definitely in the picture. Just make sure to take the proper steps before traveling abroad with a mental illness.

## What Can You Expect While Traveling Abroad

A program abroad can have one of three effects on your eating disorder recovery.

**A new culture and way of life can help you progress in your recovery even more.** This was my experience. The lifestyle I stepped into when I studied in South Africa for 3 months was different than my lifestyle back home – more laidback, more focused on time spent with others and appreciating life by simply enjoying the one you have. I found peace within the culture and the people and I no longer needed the eating disorder to find a sense of calm.

**Since you can't plan for everything when you travel, the unexpected can be triggering.** Even the most esteemed travel abroad programs can come with delays, last minute changes, setbacks, and participants or staff that you either love or could do without. Your resiliency and coping skills will be tested.

Since it's easy to turn to your ED for comfort while alone and abroad, resisting the urge is one more challenge to add to the list. This is why it's essential to make sure you are confident enough in your recovery before traveling, so these challenges don't send you spiraling backwards.

**More realistically, a combo of the two.** You'll go through periods where life in your host country is amazing and you want nothing more than to keep it that way, and periods where old triggers creep up and you have to work a bit harder to stay on track.

In my last weeks leading up to returning home, as I also prepared my final papers for class, the care-free attitude I inherited in South Africa for three months quickly reverted to my old stressed-out ways. I had to be honest to myself and program staff on what I needed to remain healthy.

## Staying Healthy Abroad

The good news is there are MANY things you can do while traveling to keep your health smooth-sailing!

**Make yourself comfortable.** Volunteering on your own in the middle of the forest is soothing for some, while studying with a group in a big city is more comfortable for others. Now is not the time to push your limits and comfort zone too far, especially for your first trip abroad in recovery. Choose a location and program type that will make for an easier transition. Don't worry – there will still be many opportunities to explore different destinations in trips to come!

**Do what you know you need to do.** Taking care of your basic health needs – a consistent sleep schedule, proper nutrition, limited alcohol, daily medications if needed, etc. – is always fundamental in any type of recovery. If you need structure and balance in your day to day life, do your research on both the country and program ahead of time to know how you will be able to incorporate stability into your new and potentially changing territory.

**Make time for yourself.** If you are used to running five times a week, journaling before going to bed each night, or starting your day in quiet meditation, make sure you find ways to fit these into your schedule. Not only do coping strategies help during times of stress, but they can also prevent potential breakdowns.

**Write things down.** Keeping a meal plan can be difficult depending on the type of program you are with, but having a rough outline along with a food journal will help control the anxiety around meal times. Adding positive affirmations, appreciations, and examples of your successful coping in the journal along the way can do wonders for your self-esteem and wellbeing too!

## Dealing With Triggers And Symptoms

Especially with longer trips abroad, triggers and symptoms are bound to arise, but that doesn't mean you have to be defeated.

**Have a plan.** Keep a step-by-step action plan you will take when you experience a severe trigger or can feel the eating disorder "voice" trying to take over. The plan could include in-the-moment coping (such as counting your breaths to 100 to let an urge subside) or skyping with someone back home to clear your head. Knowing where and how you will be able to find support will help you not get caught off guard.

**Talk to someone.** Whether you actually talk about the eating disorder, or simply talk about the weather, finding someone to connect with or a conversation to distract you also provides in-the-moment support. Being thrown into another country with a group of strangers, program participants often develop close friendships fast. If you've been able to connect with some, don't be afraid to confide in them when you are struggling. While they may not be able to directly relate to an eating disorder, chances are they will also be able to confide about their own struggles, too.

To make talking to someone easier, it's also a good idea to tell a friend you are traveling with or the director of the program abroad\* about the status of your eating disorder before departure. This will not only make it easier to bring up if the time is needed, it will also create a bigger safety network for you.

*\*If you fear telling the program will jeopardize your opportunity to participate, ask your doctor to write a letter confirming your health status.*

**Be alert.** At this stage in your recovery, you probably know and understand many of your triggers. Maintain awareness of potential triggering circumstances as well as how you are feeling around new situations. Acknowledging triggers and your emotions and talking yourself through them will help you avoid unhealthy responses and old habits.

**Be kind to yourself.** It's always frustrating when we've had a slip. Throughout all different stages of recovery, slips happen. Remember that a slip (i.e. having an episode or experiencing some symptoms) is not a relapse\* and does NOT mean we've stepped backwards. You are on a journey, you've made it this far to be able to travel abroad, and you are maintaining your health alone! Don't beat yourself up and let a slip be a floodgate for even more. Stay empowered and help yourself move on.

*\*If you feel you are experiencing a relapse, talk to your program coordinator immediately.*

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I write this while on my sixth trip abroad and in my ninth country. And while I've been living in strong recovery for five years, I still have to take proper care of myself and be careful so the eating disorder doesn't come back. But, with each travel experience, the distorted thoughts and urges grow weaker and weaker, and I grow stronger and more confident in my ability to never give in.

I guess in a sense the world has been part of my recovery. Travel when you are ready and have the support you need, so it can also be a part of yours, too.



## **MY FRIEND IS STRUGGLING WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS WHILE TRAVELING. HOW DO I HELP?**

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by Charleen Johnson Stoever

*Note: This article refers to the Westernized notion of mental illness.*

So, your friend has a mental illness. They're also abroad. You don't have to be studying counseling abroad to help them. As part of their support system, you may be wondering how their experience may be affecting them, but you also know that they are not their mental illness. They are not their depression, their bipolar disorder, or their anxiety. While one in four people experience mental illness each year, most people are able to manage their mental illness and go about their daily lives in the ways that work for them.

Dealing with travel related issues like culture shock can be stressful for anyone, no matter if they have a mental illness or not. On top of that, traveling with a condition like schizophrenia or manic episodes means having to make sure your medicine doesn't get lost and that it is legal and accessible abroad. **Whether you're wondering how to be the best travel partner for them or you're wondering how to cheer for them on the sidelines, here's some tips to be there for your buddy**

## **No Matter The Distance: Advice To Give Support**

It may seem overwhelming to support a friend with a mental illness, or it may seem like a piece of cake to you after you two have established what works. Here's how you can support someone with mental illness, no matter if you're volunteering in India and they're interning in South Africa.

### **Be empathetic.**

It's easy to mistake empathy with sympathy. You might have an LGBT friend with a mental illness who, on top of worrying about adjusting to a new culture, is worried about their safety if they come out to their host family. Or, they could be a person of color who deals with cultural, religious, linguistic barriers, and negative stereotypes depending on where they're from or where they're going. These combined factors can be weakening. You can't solve racism, sexism, classism, or homophobia. What you can do is listen.

Being an active listener and being okay with not being able to solve these problems is the key to empathy.

### **[Check out Brené Brown's explanation of Empathy vs. Sympathy.](#)**

In Brené Brown's video, she explains that it's okay not to have all the answers. It's okay to say "I don't know what that's like, but I'm here if you need me." Check out the video and it will probably be one of your favorite animal-in-a-cave videos. Whatever you do, don't be the person who just offers a sandwich. You'll also think twice about starting off a sentence with "At least."

### **Check in.**

Few things are as comforting as having friends reach out for the sake of reaching out. After my assaults and after the Orlando shooting in June, I was very public on facebook and on my blog about how these events affected me. Not once was I angry that someone reached out to me. I felt more saddened that people felt as if they couldn't or shouldn't reach out to me because they wouldn't know what to say.

After the Orlando shooting, I was in shock. As a queer woman of color, I felt as if I could have been targeted myself. I never would have thought that a horrific (but not the worst) mass shooting could happen in a "safe" space for queer people. I took two mental health days to see a therapist and to be around friends I cared about, and once I returned to social media and opened my inbox, one of my friends told me: "I stand with you. I'm proud of you. You are brave. You are loved."

I had one coworker text me out of the blue and tell me that she didn't have anything particular to say, but she wanted me to know that she was there for me in case I needed someone to listen. It made me feel loved. I thanked her for reaching out, even though we didn't end up talking.

Sometimes, it's nice to just check in without either party feeling pressured to follow through.

### **Use "I" statements.**

Using I statements instead of accusatory statements can make a world of a difference when you're addressing issues or asking something of someone, especially if they have a mental illness.

Read this statement: "You always take forever to get online to skype." What's wrong with this?

First, when using words like "always" or "never," you're making a sweeping generalization. Maybe your friend just has incredibly slow internet. Maybe they feel like they have to be emotionally grounded before talking to you first so that you don't worry about them.

Instead, say things like "I will wait for you to come home so that we can chat," or "I feel ignored when you take longer than planned to get online. I'd like to know what we can do about it." This takes more of the pressure off of your friend and sounds so much more constructive.

### **Have an open, conversation about what they're going through.**

Anyone with a mental illness is mostly aware of their limits, and travel can push those limits further. Therefore, even if you have already talked with your friend about how you can support them, initiating this conversation again with regard to travel can provide them an extreme amount of relief. If it's difficult for you to initiate conversations, just think of how hard it might be for someone with anxiety to do so.

## **Traveling Support Tips**

Are you in the same country as your friend? You may not be in the same building or city as they are, but it's comforting for them to know you understand how life in this country is different.

**Follow this advice:**

### **Communicate your needs.**

Good communication is the basis of any relationship, but being in a foreign place brings extra challenges and stresses, from extreme humidity and heat to dealing with a foreign language. Being a good travel partner means doing your fair share. Do you need to be alone? Do you need to take a break from sightseeing? If you want to stop and grab a bite to eat, say so. If they're doing all of the trip planning, suggest an activity and offer to plan it. This will keep you both happier.

If you're concerned that your buddy seems a bit out of it, remember to use "I" statements. Traveling can wear down on anyone regardless of whether or not they have a mental illness, so say something like "I'm happy we could spend time together. I notice you seem a bit tired right now. I'd like to know if you need a break. I don't need you to explain anything if you don't want to, though." Some people need to set more limits than others. As an introvert who feels anxious if I'm around people for too long, I'm open with my friends about needing alone time, and they respect my needs.

### **Offer to seek help or do research on your friend's behalf.**

You might have a better internet connection than they do to look up where to find a medicine, or they might not be as tech-savvy as you are to find some answers. Maybe you know someone who can better support your friend than you're able to with immediate resources. Be up front about the availability of your resources and your willingness to do research. If your friend isn't able to google something or get advice, you'll help them in a jiffy.

## Long-Distance Support Tips

Are you at home while they're abroad? You can still be an incredible source of love and support for your friend. **Follow this advice:**

### Be flexible.

Even if you're physically separated, you can be their support system. Find other things to do "with" them that bring them comfort and that remind them of your relationship. If you used to spend every Saturday grabbing coffee together, have a skype date while drinking coffee and catching up. It may sound silly and it won't be the same, but the sense of familiarity with a shared activity, although altered, can bring you both joy. Watch silly Youtube videos at the same time. Being self aware.

### Do your research.

There's so many resources about mental illness that can help you better understand mental illnesses ranging from eating disorders to anti-social personality disorder. Check out this database of books, movies, organizations, websites, and apps by Sylvia DeMichiel (Thanks, Sylvia!) that can help you better empathize with your buddy and understand what they're going through. After reading articles about mental illness, you'll be better able to understand how seemingly simple tasks like finding a culturally competent therapist can be easier said than done.

You want the best for your friend, and you're doing your part by finding out how you can support them. **While you care for your friend, don't feel bad if you feel a little helpless in the entire process—the point is to be there for them if they need you, but don't take it personally if they don't.** Traveling with a mental illness comes with its own set of challenges, but now that you're better informed about how you can support your buddy, you both can have an ultimately rewarding travel experience.

*Special thanks to Sylvia for her time, effort, and teachings as I put together this piece.*



## INTERESTED IN SHARING YOUR STORY?

We want to hear from you! [Contact us](#) to share your experience.

## HAVE SUGGESTIONS OR RESOURCES TO ADD TO OUR COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE?

Email [erin.oppenheim@goabroad.com](mailto:erin.oppenheim@goabroad.com)

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