

# Mental Health Concerns & Education Abroad Participation

Learning abroad can be both fulfilling and challenging for students. For those with mental health concerns, it presents additional challenges. It's critical that we work together to offer support via effective referrals and resources.

## Can students with psychiatric and mental health conditions study abroad?

Yes. Past or current treatment for psychiatric and mental health conditions does not preclude a student from studying abroad. However, if a health care professional recommends no travel or travel under certain conditions that cannot be met at a certain study location, we may encourage students to focus on their health first and postpone program participation until a later time.

## How can I normalize the challenges associated with study abroad?

Expressly state to students with mental health concerns that ups and downs are normal for most students on any study abroad experience. They will struggle, as will all of their peers.

## If a student has a mental health concern, to whom do I refer them?

Encourage the student to make an appointment with a Learning Abroad Center (LAC) staff member to disclose their concern. The relevant staff member is listed on the "Contact" webpage of each study abroad program.

## What form should students use to disclose?

All students submit a Health Information Form after they are accepted into a program to help LAC staff prepare them to go abroad and help program staff provide appropriate support on site. Encourage students to disclose any past and current mental health issues, family history of mental health, indications of mental health concerns, and current prescription medicines. Information disclosed by students is protected as private student data under FERPA and is shared with program staff, faculty, or appropriate professionals only if pertinent to the student's well-being. Early disclosure is essential for LAC staff to provide the best possible support and is especially important in cases where a mental health issue requires an accommodation on site.

If students require an accommodation related to a mental health issue or any other type of disability, they should work with the UofM Disability Resource Center to complete an Accommodation Request Form, available on the LAC website. That form is submitted to LAC staff who then work with on-site staff to determine if and how the requested accommodations can be made.

## Should students with mental health concerns meet with a mental health professional prior to departure?

Yes. Encourage them to discuss with their mental health professional:

- o going abroad and the possible challenges associated with this new learning environment
- o their plan to manage their health, including full supplies of medication
- o access to support networks while abroad

## Can students set up on-site care before departure?

Yes. Students can connect with an LAC staff member prior to departure to set up on-site care with a mental health care professional. They should also plan to bring with them sufficient amounts of prescriptions for the entire duration of their program and additional time abroad. LAC staff can help determine whether they can safely bring all necessary prescriptions.

## How can I help students develop a realistic plan for communication with their support networks back home while they are abroad?

Encourage them to think about how and when they will be connecting with family, friends, and advisers while abroad. It's important for students to determine how often they will be checking in; for example, some advisers suggest a midterm Skype session to discuss overall well-being and re-entry concerns. Connecting with their support network back home is important, but it is also critical for them to communicate with on-site staff if the challenges are intense, persistent, or interfering with their success while learning abroad.

## How will on-site staff assist students while abroad?

Finding a balance between academic and personal lives is a challenge for all students learning abroad. On-site staff will discuss with students the delicate balance of remaining connected with networks at home while being present and making use of the host culture's support system. Staff will also help them engage with local activities and resources and encourage them to disconnect from social media.

Many programs offer regular group and/or one-on-one check-ins with program staff that give students an opportunity to discuss issues or concerns and help staff gauge students' well-being.

Students should neither suffer alone nor suffer long. Encourage students to reach out to the on-site staff and their support network. When traveling on a University of Minnesota program, students are required to be covered by a medical insurance plan that has provisions for mental health care and return home if warranted.

## Resources

1. Mental and Physical Health: [UMabroad.umn.edu/students/healthsafety/healthinfo](https://umabroad.umn.edu/students/healthsafety/healthinfo)
2. Addressing Mental Health Issues Affecting Education Abroad Participants: [shop.nafsa.org/detail.aspx?id=102E](https://shop.nafsa.org/detail.aspx?id=102E)
3. GPS Health While Abroad: [global.umn.edu/travel/health/index.html#/1](https://global.umn.edu/travel/health/index.html#/1)
4. Student Counseling Services—self-guided online assessment and resources: [counseling.umn.edu/counseling/online](https://counseling.umn.edu/counseling/online)

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