

MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING ABROAD HANDBOOK

Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU)



Toronto
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University

Global
Learning

Toronto, Canada 



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Mental Health & Wellbeing Abroad

Deciding to take part in a global learning activity opens the door for an exciting and enriching experience. In considering whether this is the right activity for you, it is important that you evaluate the potential impact this may have on your mental health. This is true for all students, and perhaps more so for those who have a previous or existing mental health condition. Participating in a global learning activity will likely involve transitions that induce stress. Furthermore, while you are abroad you may not be able to access the same range of support services available to you here in Toronto and at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU). With careful and early planning, however, you will be able to manage the stresses of going abroad successfully. This section is a good resource to explore when considering a global learning activity and how to cope with the potential impact on your mental health. The considerations below have been shaped by the experiences of other students with mental health conditions who have gone abroad.

Note that some of this information was adapted from [Brandeis University - Office of Study Abroad's Mental Health page](#). It has been reviewed and further developed with the help of [TMU's Centre for Student Development and Counselling \(CSDC\)](#).

1. General mental health questions:

How to recognize when the stress you're experiencing is at unhealthy level?

It is common to feel some stress before, during and after a global learning activity as you will be going through various stages of adjustment. Ongoing and increasing stress is not, however, especially if it is having an impact on your ability to function as you usually would. You want to look for a change in your sleep pattern (more or less), change in appetite (more or less), trouble concentrating, worrying, isolating, increase in use of alcohol, and loss of interest in fun activities. If you notice any of these signs, seek help by reaching out to your activity organizer and ask for their support. If symptoms worsen, contact [TMU Global](#) or [International SOS \(ISOS\)](#). If you are having thoughts of suicide, get help immediately. Your health and safety are extremely important, inform your program and ask to be taken to an emergency room.

How to access counselling services quickly to deal with an unexpected mental health crisis?

International SOS (ISOS) is our health and safety partner organization. All students participating in global learning activities abroad must register for ISOS. ISOS can provide you with access to up to 6 sessions of phone-counseling for free. Students are able to proactively set up a call with a counselor in advance of travel to ensure a counseling session is scheduled upon arrival at the host destination. See our section on [Safety Abroad](#) for more information.

What does it feel like to be homesick, and how can you cope with it?

Homesickness is normal and should subside as you adjust. It can be felt as anxiety, sadness, and nervousness as well as a preoccupation with thoughts of home, family, and friends; you're really missing your routine and a sense of security. Homesickness can be helped by looking for ways to get involved with others, putting yourself in new situations, establishing a routine, staying engaged with your new program, doing something to feel closer to home, talking to someone who understands, and remembering this feeling is not permanent, and you can take actions to help it pass.

What to do take care of your mental health while away?

Some helpful coping strategies are:

- keeping a regular sleep routine
- eating well
- exercising
- maintaining a healthy schedule
- exercising good judgement about the use of alcohol
- looking for ways to get involved and engaged with others
- using available supports
- staying in touch with family and friends from home is helpful, however, it is important not to rely on this as your only source of social interaction. For instance, you could choose to limit connecting with friends and family to once per week

How to use your past resilience to support you in difficult times abroad:

Think back to the last time you had to transition to a new environment: the first-year of university might be a good point. How did you deal with the stress and anxiety of that time? What support systems (friends, family, language) did you have in place to help you? Will you have similar supports while abroad? If not, how can you access them?

2. Some things to consider if you have a previous or existing mental health condition:

Disclosing Your Mental Health/Psychiatric Condition to Your Activity Coordinator

In order to safely participate in global learning activities, your first step should be to inform your activity coordinator or other staff at Toronto Metropolitan University who may be able to support you exploring your options (eg. Student Accommodation Support at your host institution). They will be able to help you in identifying how your needs will be met while participating.

Ongoing Therapeutic Support From a Mental Health Practitioner

You will need to let your activity coordinator know as soon as possible if you know in advance that you are in need of ongoing support from a mental health practitioner. You will also need to clarify that your health insurance will cover such care. Making arrangements to meet with a specific practitioner and clarifying payment arrangements before you go is best. Even if you are uncertain whether you will need psychotherapy or psychiatric care while away, clarifying the resources available and your insurance coverage ahead of time is wise.

Psychiatric Medications

If you are currently on psychiatric medications, have your prescriber prescribe enough medicine for your entire stay abroad. Check to see if your medicine is legal in your destination country. In the event that it is not and as a safety measure, have your prescriber write a letter on letterhead stating that you are being prescribed this medicine. Carry medicine in the original pill bottles with the prescription label on the bottle.

Using the Toronto Metropolitan University Counseling Center While Abroad

The Toronto Metropolitan University Centre for Student Development and Counselling cannot provide therapeutic support to students who are not on campus. However, our office will work with you to try and secure therapeutic support at your host destination. In addition, as stated above, [International SOS](#) is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week to offer advice and support in order to connect you with in country counsellors, practitioners or doctors, as well as explore the option of telephone counselling with one of their healthcare professionals.

Resources:

- [Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) at Toronto Metropolitan University
- [Balancing Mental Health Abroad](#) - Article written by U.S. students about studying abroad and mental health.
- [Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mental Health Issues Abroad](#) - Article written by student participating in study abroad through Northwestern University about managing mental health issues abroad.
- [Preparations for Travel with Mental Health Conditions](#) - A resource guide put together by Mobility
- [International USA.](#)
- [Resource Library for Mental Health](#) - National Clearing House on Disability and Exchange